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

- Introduction
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- 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

Topics for Part I:

- Why Divorce Therapy?
- What is Divorce Therapy?
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- A Brief History of Divorce and Divorce Therapy
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- One-Person Divorce Therapy: Work with Individual Adults
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Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

Why Divorce Therapy (DT)?

-Families have several tasks in the separation and divorce process: grieving, reorganizing, communicating differently, making new goals, integrating new members. Completion of these tasks positively impacts all family members; DT can help the family avoid typical impasses and successfully complete its tasks.

(Appell, 2006; Emery, 2004)

-Children of families who experience divorce have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and behavior problems, and may experience relationship problems later in life; children whose families have orderly and effective divorces tend to have fewer of these problems.

(Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996; Heatherington, 2002)

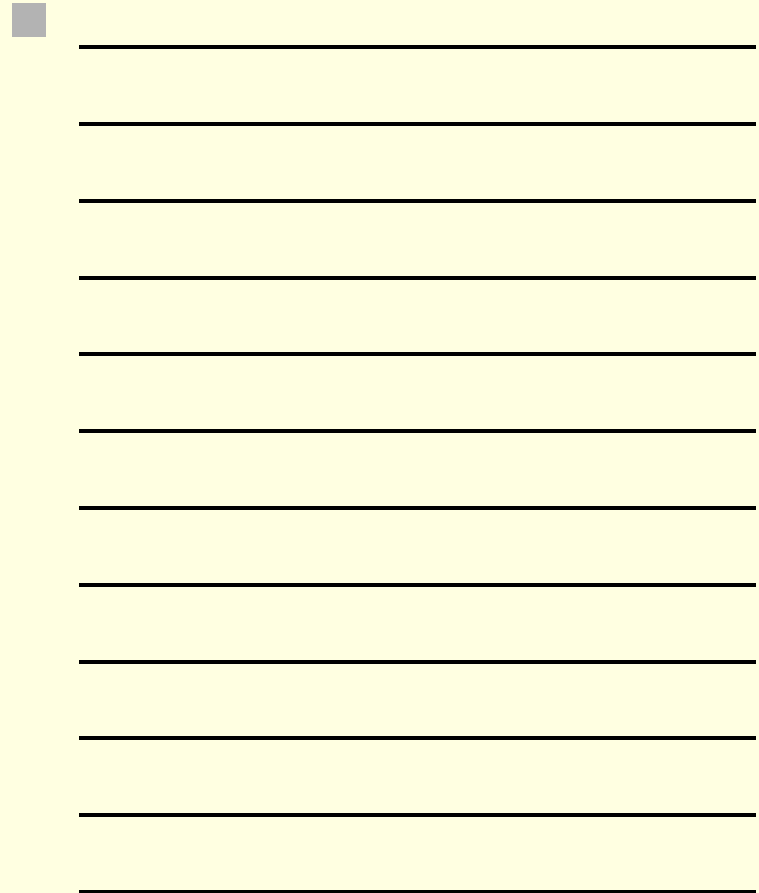
-How separation and divorce occurs sets the stage for how the family organizes itself and communicates itself in future years; divorced families with strong organization and effective communication have children who function better in a range of areas.

(Isaacs, 2000)

Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

What is Divorce Therapy?

- Treatment which aims to recover, restore and reconfigure family relationships and the functions of parent, child, sibling in response to a separation. (Isaacs, 2000)
- DT helps a family reorganize into a functional “two-home family”. (Dozier, 2004) DT helps families alter their ways of relating, levels of intimacy, degrees of power, and roles of its members so the family functions more effectively. (Emery, 1994)
- DT principles can be applied with families who have already experienced divorce; DT is especially powerful during separation and divorce.
- One can utilize principles of divorce therapy when working with an individual adult or child
- Pieces of divorce therapy (co-parenting work, work to strengthen individual households, sibling work) can positively impact the whole family system.





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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.

-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.

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

-Couples therapy can sometimes be converted into divorce therapy.

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



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A Brief History of Divorce and Divorce Therapy

-Rate of divorce rose sharply in the 1960s and 1970s: causes included economic mobility, the sexual revolution, focus on individual children's development, more women in workforce, rise of no-fault divorce laws.

-Divorce in late 1960s/early 1970s had generally straightforward custody agreements; the divorce process tended to be less conflictive. "Father's Rights" groups saw many divorce agreements as inequitable and fought for legal changes.

-Rise of high-conflict divorce over the last 30 years. Custody became linked to parental qualifications, child support payments became linked to custody. Research began to show the effects of chaotic divorces on families (Trafford, 1982).

-1980s (and ongoing): Research demonstrated that negative effects of divorce can be ameliorated by an orderly divorce process, and that the divorce process sets the stage for how the family will continue to interact.

(Wallerstein, Heathington, op. cit.)

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A Brief History of Divorce and Divorce Therapy (continued)

-1980s: rise of mediation (Margulies, 2007) Families of Divorce project studied divorce therapy in a clinic in Philadelphia (Isaacs, op. cit.). Specific techniques developed for particular clinical presentations (i.e., “The Confrontation Parade”).

-1990s: Co-parenting and “good divorce” concepts refined (Ahrons, 1994); rise of collaborative law; mechanisms such as parenting coordinators and best interests attorneys developed by courts to ameliorate effects of high-conflict divorces. Games (“My Two Homes”) and books (It’s Not Your Fault, Koko Bear) created to help kids manage divorce. “Divorce Therapy” viewed as an intervention (Textor, 1994)

-2000s: Brenda Dozier’s “two-home family” approach looks at family as reorganized unit with distinct parts. (Dozier, op. cit.); co-parenting, family therapy with individual households, sibling work, and individual work with children and adults viewed as components of a holistic “divorce therapy” process (Appell, op. cit.; Gaulier, 2007).



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The Impact of Divorce

-*The Family Experience:* even in “orderly” divorces, the family experiences some “crazy time”. Communication may be fractious and inconsistent. Nurturance and discipline may be unevenly/inconsistently applied by parents. Unhealthy coalitions may develop, between parents and individual children, between sibling groups and between family members and outside actors. Power differentials between ex-spouses may develop with respect to finances, emotional functioning, and the strength of children’s loyalty. In healthier divorces, instability/imbalance are contained, families get support, and the family reorganizes into a more complex system. (Trafford, 1982)

-*The Individual Adult Experience:* In difficult divorces, adults may cycle through extreme emotional states (elation, rage, despair, numbing). They are at risk for depression, substance abuse, regression/ acting out; may neglect basic parenting responsibilities. In healthier divorces, adults are able to mourn their loss and face up to their many tasks in a deliberative fashion. *Effects are typically very different for “leaver” vs. “left”.* (Emery, 1994)



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The Impact of Divorce (continued)

-*Children's well-being* is related to how adults communicate and function, relationship with each parent, individual resources. Normal adjustment takes up to a year. Adolescents are at risk for emotional, conduct, and alcohol/drug problems, particularly in high-conflict divorces (Appell, op. cit.).

-*Extended families* often step in and provide crucial economic and emotional support. However, they, too, are affected by the trauma of divorce, and may act out their pain by intensifying division and strife in the family.

-The negative effects of high-conflict divorces are *multi-generational*; children of high-conflict divorce are more likely to divorce (Wallerstein, op. cit.).

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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

(Emery, 2004; Margulies, 2007)

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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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Principles for Practicing Divorce Therapy (continued)

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

-Limit influence of antagonistic groupings

-Control potentially hostile encounters—break up negative interactions.

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

-Avoid triangulation—don't deliver messages.

-Keep clear about your role

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

-Make sure the legal process is as constructive as possible

-Proceed in stages

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

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Stage I: Managing Pre-Separation Crises

-Meet with the spouses: focus on problem-solving, needs of children.

-Modulate tension and take charge; avoid open-ended enactments.

-Meet alone with each spouse to solidify alliances and gain information.

-Help spouses look at the context of any decisions within the history of relationship, other life issues.

-Bring in children in if appropriate

-Assess alternatives: re-committing, staying together temporarily, taking a “marital vacation”, a trial separation, or separation and divorce. **Aim for clarity**—avoid premature decisions, but too much indecisiveness/back and forth can be very damaging to the family

(Isaacs, op. cit; Appell, op. cit.).

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Stage II: Planning for Disengagement

-Establish guidelines for disengagement. Aim to make separation “expeditious and deliberate”.

-Begin to define the post-separation relationship: educate regarding “co-parenting”.

-Discuss mechanisms for contact, guidelines for communication, specific tasks.

-Assist in establishing a short-term parenting plan

-Considerations for scheduling: children’s developmental needs, special needs, practical needs. **Avoid either too frequent transitions or too little contact with each parent.**

-Consider **the approximation rule** in scheduling: children’s lives should approximate as close as possible what existed prior to the separation.

(Emery, 2004)

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Planning for Disengagement (continued)

-Offer the following guidelines for telling the children:

-Obtain accurate story, minimize blame, explain how divorce will affect day-to-day lives, reassure that divorce does not change parent's feelings towards children, assure that children are not to blame, be emotionally available to explore children's feelings.

-Older children may need to know some reasons for the divorce. Create a common message in a non-blaming way, with as few unnecessary details as possible. Assure them, if possible, that the marriage was based on love, and that parents tried to keep the marriage together (Emery, 2004).

It is usually not advisable to use the therapy office as the place for telling the children of the separation.

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Stage IV: Assisting the Spouses with the Legal Process

-Ask about the legal steps spouses have already taken; evaluate level of trust and risk of precipitous actions.

-Frame the legal process as way of finding an arrangement that works. Remind them that out of control legal processes can result in: emotional and behavioral disturbances among the children, family stress, a depletion of finances, further litigation, and the greater possibility of alienation of children from one or both parents. Cite research that children of high-conflict divorce develop black-and-white thinking and have difficulty solving interpersonal problems (Gaulier Et. Al., 2007).

-Remind spouses to take responsibility for legal decisions.

-Encourage compromise by pointing out that in any divorce each partner will need to have “less”—money or time with kids—and that when one partner “wins” by having much more than the other, the whole family loses (Margulies, op. cit.).

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Stage IV: Assisting the Spouses with the Legal Process (continued)

-Cite research that shows that kids do better when parents have roughly equal levels of economic and emotional well-being (Ahrns, op. cit.).

-Remind spouses that aggressive legal action may result in reaction, with increased conflict and costs.

-Advise spouses that constructive legal processes are predictable, without surprise attacks.

-Remind parents that they can maintain a relationship and care for their children even when they do not have custody. Considerations for custody decisions should be based on the need for children to have continuity, be cared for, and maintain a relationship with both parents (Emery, 2004) .

-Advise spouses of the various legal paths to divorce. Explore which paths are most likely to lead to positive effects for the whole family.

Monitor the legal proceedings, as they can undermine the entire therapeutic process



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

The Conventional Paths Towards a Legal Divorce:

About 90% of legal divorces are still done via litigation.

1) *The Uncontested Divorce*—one or both spouses files for divorce, in which a resolution of all issues (custody, support, property division, grounds) has been reached, usually by agreement. This can be the least complicated route with limited conflict, although it can also involve lengthy and costly negotiation.

2) *The Contested Divorce*—one or both spouses files for divorce, in which a resolution of all or some of the issues (custody, support, property division, grounds) has not been reached, leading to litigation. Not all contested divorces lead to high-conflict divorces. However, any contested divorce runs the risk of spinning out of control.

Even if a contested divorce is necessary, remind spouses to maintain control of the legal process with an eye towards the needs of the family.

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A Primer of Legal Terms

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

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

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

-*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).

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

-*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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The High Conflict Divorce

-Extra/quasi-legal actions which generate conflict:
moving money into personal accounts, alleging neglect/abuse of children, cutting spouse out of children’s lives, staying in the marital home without spouse’s consent, hiring investigators to establish grounds for divorce, threats and intimidation, cutting off communication, bad-mouthing spouse.

-Legal actions which may escalate the process include:

- restraining orders
- onerous motions for discovery
- orders to vacate marital home
- contempt of court motions
- challenges to “fitness” of a parent (may result in psychological evaluations of one or either parent)
- motions for injunctive relief (freezing of assets)

-Legal costs can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Parties often receive money from extended family and/or run into debt—sometimes lawyers sue litigants to collect.

(Gaulier, Et. Al., op. cit.)

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Professionals involved in high-conflict divorces:

***Custody evaluators:** typically appointed by judges to determine legal and physical custody. Usually forensic psychologists.

***Best Interest Attorneys (formerly *guardian ad litem*):** Lawyers appointed by the Court to represent the needs and wishes of children.

***Parenting Coordinators:** Individuals (therapists or lawyers) usually appointed by the Court who work with the parents, advise and/or make limited decisions/recommendations regarding schedules, education, and medical decisions.

*Generally both spouses bear the cost of hiring these professionals.

In high-conflict divorces, lawyers and other professionals tend to take increasing control over the divorce process.

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Options for Alternative Dispute Resolution Procedures

1) Mediation— Negotiation with a qualified mediator, usually without lawyers present. The mediator does not represent either party and cannot bind parties to an agreement. They can be retained privately or court appointed. Lawyers can review the agreement prior to signing. Mediation can be less expensive and straightforward, but it can generate higher conflict or poor agreements if there are economic, intellectual, or emotional power imbalances.

2) Collaborative Law--Both spouses agree to hire their lawyers to negotiate, not to litigate. Most negotiations happen in four way meetings. Besides lawyers, a collaborative law case can involve therapists, financial planners, appraisers, evaluators, mediators, and child development experts.

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Options for Alternative Dispute Resolution Procedures (continued)

3) **Binding Arbitration**— Both spouses along with their respective lawyers meet with a third party to resolve the financial/property issues. Can save both time and money. Can be court ordered.

4) **The “do it yourself” divorce**—can be an inexpensive and rapid option; only appropriate in low-conflict divorces where there is a roughly equal power balance and partners are knowledgeable about rights and law.

Characteristics of legal processes that facilitate productive divorces

-Relatively expeditious, while still planned and deliberative.

-Costs as little as possible.

-Results in improved communication between ex-spouses, or at least contains negativity.

-Results in roughly equal levels of economic and emotional well-being for both ex-spouses.

-Maintains the involvement of both parents in children’s lives. (Margulies, op. cit.)

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Stage V: Building a New Organization: Strengthening the Sibling Relationship

- Meet with the children as soon as possible following the separation
- Offer education, clarification
- Encourage balanced, “gray” thinking
- Watch for “choosing up sides” between parents; emphasize importance of kids respecting authority of each parent—respect includes some attention and contact
- Balance the need for sibs to support each other with parents’ need to discipline
- Encourage adaptability; e.g., one sib may need to sometimes act “*in loco parentis*”.
- Indications for individual work: extreme conflict between sibs, individual mental health/behavioral disturbances.

(Isaacs, op. cit; Appell, op. cit.).

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Stage VI: Building a New Organization: Setting up Effective Co-parenting

- This stage generally grows out of the uncoupling work, and may continue throughout the treatment.
- Set up mechanisms, topics of communication
- Establish the “business partnership” as the ideal; acknowledge limitations.
- If indicated, hold limited sessions to “put the past behind”.
- Agree not to use kids as messengers, or secret-keepers
- Agree on minimal behavioral expectations for kids; warn of hazards of “fairy-tale parenting”.
- Focus on need for parents to give a common message to kids to respect parents. Encourage them to support rules of other household in front of the kids.
- Focus on need for both parents to demonstrate confidence in the capacities of the other parent.

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Stage VI: Building a New Organization: Setting up Effective Co-parenting (Continued)

Different Strategies for Different Couples:

- For less contentious separations, aim for **cooperative parenting**: open, frequent communication, maximum consistency

- For higher conflict couples, encourage **parallel parenting**: communication around emergencies, deviations from plan (Ahrns, op. cit.).

- In sessions with “*sporadic and scared fighters*”, make sure to build trust individually; set ground rules; aim for controlled, calm encounters; encourage parents to communicate through the therapist at first.

- In sessions with “*frequent and direct fighters*” highlight consequences of fighting with monologues. A high-risk but potentially powerful strategy is to let a conflict play out to highlight its destructiveness.

- As couples solve problems, build trust, and develop communication skills, slowly facilitate **guided enactments**.

- Involve children in sessions judiciously. The “**Confrontation Parade**” can be a powerful technique for decreasing conflict. (Emery, 1994.; Isaacs, op. cit.; Ahrns, op. cit.)

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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.

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

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

-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”.

- 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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Special Problems: Arresting Distancing and Disengagement Between Parents and Children

-Re-establishing Nurturance: ally with abdicating parent, highlight child's needs, use more nurturing parent to support process

-Re-establishing Discipline: highlight protective, caring aspect of rules to abdicating parent; help parent manage guilt, insecurity; challenge children's manipulations.

-Utilize the "closer parent" in for both of these tasks; challenge undermining; focus on parental unity; encourage closer parent to voice confidence in the abilities of the other.

-Assist children in seeing how they may be contributing to the distancing/disengagement process. Affirm their responsibility to respect and maintain relationships with both parents

(Isaacs, op. cit.; Appell, op. cit.; Gaulier, op. cit.).

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Special Problems: Combating Parental Alienation

-Alienation (damaging of the parent-child bond) happens in many separations; in high-conflict divorces some alienation is usually present.

-*Working with the allied parent*: educate about dangers for child. Challenge enmeshment: support in managing anxiety/loneliness, tolerating negative feelings that come with setting limits; encourage them to insist that children show respect to other parent

-*Working with the estranged parent*: help parent to focus on child’s plight, encourage non-intrusive “affinity-seeking” to re-start relationship

-*Working with the alienated children*: encourage gray thinking, individuation from allied parent, broach range of positive memories of alienated parent; utilize siblings when indicated.

(Isaacs, op. cit; Appell, op. cit.; Gaulier, op. cit.).

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Special Problems: Addressing the Abuse Issue (for both parents and children)

-Take a considered approach to assessment of abuse: severity, context, frequency, intention, etc.; be aware of the legal/emotional function of false allegations.

-Unless there is significant danger, children do best when there is ongoing contact (as distinguished from custody) with both parents, and families do best when ex-spouses communicate.

-Even with severe abuse, controls can usually be put in place for contact between parents and children, and safety mechanisms can be utilized for effective communication between ex-spouses

(Gaulier, op. cit.; Isaacs, op. cit.).



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Special Problems: Special Needs and Divorce

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

-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.

-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).

-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.

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.

-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.

-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.

-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 .

Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

Applying the Principles of DT to Individuals

1) *Work with Individual Adults*

-Aim for movement through stages of divorce.
Promote balanced thinking.

-Combat paralyzing fear, helplessness, shame, anger, and elation by re-directing clients towards the present and future, looking at context of events, facilitating perspective, and predicting that the intensity of feelings/circumstances will shift.

-Remind clients of the effect of their actions on children’s well-being. Challenge efficacy of actions aimed at revenge as well as any avoidance of parenting responsibilities. Educate about the tasks of divorce and the importance of planned, rational divorce process.

-Generally avoid “uncovering” feeling work, particularly during crisis periods. Suggest ways to cope and get support. (Textor, 1994; Emery, 2004)

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2) Work with Individual Children

-The involvement of siblings and parents can enhance sibling work

-Establish and maintain contact with both parents. Do intake with both parents if possible, meet with them both separately. Get both signatures!

-Avoid “grilling” for facts

-Support “gray thinking” and respect for both parents

-Avoid privileging particular emotions to the exclusion of others

-Encourage appropriate assertion of needs and practical coping

-Facilitate organized play; expand emotional vocabulary

-Utilize psycho-education and games, books: My Two Homes, Dinosaurs Divorce, It’s Not Your Fault, Koko Bear, etc. (Appell, op. cit.; Textor, op. cit.).

Horizontal lines for note-taking



Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

Conclusion: Consolidating Gains and Moving Towards the Future

-Effective DT can help a family to mourn, establish clarity about the future, break up toxic coalitions and alliances, generate stable households, improve individual relationships, and help ex-spouses to form an effective alliance. The result can be a more stable family structure and more positive family relationships for years to come.

-DT can minimize mood/behavior problems in children and make them more capable of establishing healthy, committed relationships as adults.

-As treatment concludes, it is to assist the family in anticipating future changes, and have mechanisms to adjust as circumstances shift.

-One or both parents will likely re-partner within 5 years (Textor, op. cit.). Advise parents to act deliberately, in appropriate consultation with one another, and recognize the complex tasks involved in integrating step-relationships into family systems.

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Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

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

The Drive Towards Re-Partnering

- Re-partnering often happens in the midst of chaotic divorces—desperation/elation may influence dating decisions. The lack of social support for older singles may contribute to drive to re-partner.
- The presence of a partner can complicate the legal process. The partner may influence a spouse to push harder in monetary negotiations; the other spouse may fight harder for custody.
- A partner’s presence may inflame the other spouse, and generate conflicting feelings in children. The potential for unhealthy triangulation and cross-generational alliances in the family system increases.
- Partners introduced into the family system shortly after the separation are more likely to cause conflict and division; they may even be blamed for the break-up (Gerlach, 2003)



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Remarriage and Divorce

-About 75% of divorced individuals remarry; most remarriages occur within four years of the separation; most divorces result in at least one party re-partnering within 5 years of the divorce. The trauma of divorce and the lack of support can inhibit ex-spouses from making healthy choices. Romantic blindness, the conviction that “this will work because it has to work” are common mind-sets which lead to a lack of planning and hasty remarriages. Also, many people are not aware of the complex tasks involved in stepfamily integration.

-Conflictive co-parenting can stress a new couple, even as it may be a driver towards remarriage.

-Children’s ambivalence towards new partners is often not apparent, and can result in behavioral issues as the marriage approaches. (Gerlach, 2003)



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Challenges for the Stepfamily/Differences with First-Marriage Families (continued)

-Children are members of other households with different norms

-Society tends to view stepfamily members, stepfamily relationships, and the stepfamily in a negative light.

-There are few realistic models of functional stepfamilies. Portrayals of happy stepfamilies, like “The Brady Bunch”, tend to be unrealistic.

-There is role ambiguity. There is little or no legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, and an ambiguous expectation as to the duties stepfamily members have towards each other.

-There tends to be less family unity and cohesion; definitions of who is in the family may differ.



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Challenges for the Stepfamily/Differences with First-Marriage Families (continued)

-The monetary interests of each partner are more likely to differ.

-The relationship between stepfamily members is dependent on the marriage.

-Positive relationship bonds in one dyad may generate tension in other relationships. A solid couple relationship may generate distance between parents and children; tight parent-child relationships may conflict with the marriage.

-The emotional climate tends to be intense and unexpected.

- **Stepfamily advantages:** children have more adults to care for and love them; adults may find more appropriate partners; people can learn flexibility; there may be more outside support systems. (Visher and Visher, 1996)

Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Individuals in the Stepfamily

-**Stepmothers**—may feel unappreciated, used, neglected, disrespected, insecure; may respond by pushing intimacy, withdrawing, or retaliating.

-**Stepfathers**—may feel shut out, “unmanned”, powerless; may act out helpless rage or withdraw.

-**Stepdaughters**—may feel threatened, may experience conflicted loyalties; may test limits

-**Stepsons**—may feel “demoted”, particularly by stepfathers; may feel resentful; may test limits

-**The Remarried parent**—may feel “in the middle”, pulled in several directions; may neglect needs of self or others.

-**The “other” parent**—may feel threatened and undermined; may undermine family in return

-The stepfamily structure can impact the family’s capacity to meet its members’ **basic emotional needs**--to belong to a group, to be cared about and loved with secure attachments, and to have control and autonomy. (Ganong, 2004)



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Stepfamily Relationships

1) *The couple relationship*

-Often challenging; high divorce rates. Stepfamily complexity, role ambiguities, and lack of social support generate stress.

-May be neglected because of the need to manage third parties (kids, former partners).

-Some stepfamily tasks, such as reassuring biological children or establishing authority of stepparent, can conflict with the relationship.

-Typical disagreements include: issues related to children from prior relationships, financial issues, former spouses, extended family members.

-Decision-making can be more equitable than in first-marriage families, although not with respect to children from prior relationships.

-About half of couples have their own children, or 'concrete babies'. A new baby can add richness as well as complexity and challenge.



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.

Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Stepfamily Relationships

2) Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships (continued)

-The quality of the relationship is affected by how much support the remarried parent gives the stepparent, how much attention the remarried parent gives the child, and whether the other bio parent supports the relationship.

-Stepparents abuse their stepchildren at higher rates than biological parents; false allegations as well as tragic misunderstandings are also a danger. Much abuse happens in the context of poor stepparent-stepchild bonds, and when precautions are not taken.

3) Remarried Parent-Child Relationships

-The remarrying parent may be the target of anger from the children because of the remarriage. The parent may feel guilt, be protective of the children, and fear relationship deterioration, making limit-setting difficult.



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Stepfamily Relationships (continued)

4) Sibling Relationships

-Children may reside full or part-time with any combination of siblings, stepsiblings, and half-siblings. *Full siblings* tend to be less close than in first-parent families; a supportive sibling relationship can be a protective factor for children in stepfamilies. *Half-sibling* relationships may be competitive; presence of a half-sibling can complicate stepparent-stepchild relationships. *Stepsiblings* may not consider each other kin; conflict can be intense. They get along better if they share positive experiences, do not have to struggle over affection/resources, and perceive themselves to be treated equally by parents (Ganong, 2004).

-Sexual acting out between step-siblings can cause enormous turmoil; families that acknowledge the danger and take precautionary steps are more likely to avoid it.



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).

Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Different Kinds of Stepfamilies

-There are an extraordinary variety of stepfamilies. Stepfamilies can be places of primary, 50/50, or secondary residence for children from prior relationships on one or both sides (with schedules that overlap or not); can include children from current relationships; can include stepmothers, stepfathers, or both.

Implications of differences for stepfamily success:

-the greater the complexity of scheduling and differences in closeness of relationships, the greater the challenges and need for compromise and flexibility.

-the more custody is shared, the more important to manage relations with the other household

-The less time children live with a family, the more important not to push stepfamily unity: prioritize parent-child time, keep stepparents to "friendly" roles, and refrain from forcing step-siblings to spend time together ((Martin, 1992)



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.



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)

Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Elements of Successful Stepfamilies

-There are realistic expectations for the time and complexity of building a family.

-Unity and integration are not “pushed”: displays of affection by the couple are avoided at first, lengthy family outings are minimized in the beginning. “Family” words between step-kin are not insisted upon.

-Stepparents come in slowly, do not compete with biological parents, and strive to be a confidante/friend to the stepchild. Realistic and reasonable commitments and obligations, including monetary ones, are concretized.

-The step-parent and the remarried parent agree upon rules and have a consistent parenting philosophy; the remarried parent takes primary responsibility for enforcing the rules; respect for the stepparent is insisted upon.

-The expectation for step-relationships is respect and civility, not love. Precautions are taken to minimize chances of abuse/sexual acting out as well as false allegations.



Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Elements of Successful Stepfamilies (continued)

-Time is made for individual relationships: the couple, the stepparent and stepchild, the remarried parent and child.

-Family members work to empathize with each other's differing needs.

-The remarried parent works with the other household to provide consistency; the other household supports the stepfamily and respects household boundaries; the extended family supports the stepfamily.

-There is a conscious development of rituals—bedtime stories, chores, family meetings, etc.

-There are flexible gender roles. Stepfathers may do more nurturing/less discipline, stepmothers may take less responsibility for child-rearing.

- The family and individuals find support and validation outside the family.

-There is an appreciation of the rewards of stepfamilies, and a healthy family self-concept. (adapted from Visher and Visher, 1996)

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Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

Treating Stepfamilies: General Guidelines

- Proceed deliberately; start with information gathering and relationship-building with individuals and small groups
- Generate realistic expectations about the pace and scope of change.
- Educate about stepfamily differences and the specific steps needed for stepfamilies to successfully integrate
- Establish a comfortable, predictable, and hopeful atmosphere. Avoid whole-family sessions, ambiguous situations, and open-ended enactments at first.
- Generate empathy with multiple perspectives; reframe behavior in terms of human needs; validate and normalize.
- Establish that all family members have a contribution to family success.
- Aim for the slow development of relationships, order and cohesion; do not push change.

-Acknowledge and attend to losses

-Attend to the family's self-esteem/emphasize positive elements of stepfamilies

-Note achievements/build realistic hope

(Martin, 1992, Visher and Visher, 1996)

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).

Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

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- 8) Visher, Emily, and Visher, John Therapy With Stepfamilies Routledge Press:1996

Resources for Consumers:

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

Books for consumers:

- 1) Einstein and Albert Strengthening Your Stepfamily American Guidance Service:1986
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Families of Increasing Complexity

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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