

“GET OVER IT”: PERSPECTIVES ON DIVORCE FROM YOUNG CHILDREN*

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Young children’s perspectives on divorce were examined using a multimethod assessment. Forty-one children ages 3.5 to 7.5 were recruited from a preventive intervention program for divorcing parents. Most children gave simple but accurate descriptions of divorce processes. Play themes centered on wishes for parental reunion, concerns for security, and complexities of having two homes. Despite the prevalence of fantasy reunion play, most children drew parents as apart in the family drawing, suggesting realistic shifts in family schemas. Intervention group children exhibited clearer, more balanced views of their fathers and displayed more coherent and less affectively disrupted play sequences.

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Child and adolescent mental health clinicians see thousands of children annually who are growing up in families with divorced parents. Sometimes the divorce itself is the focus of treatment, and other times it is distally connected to more pressing concerns. Over the past four decades, there has been an accumulation of large clinical and research literatures attesting to the deleterious effects of parental divorce on children’s well-being (e.g., Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). But surprisingly few studies have measured repercussions from the children’s perspective. Children have provided information through the use of child-report instruments, with the focus on quantifying levels of adjustment (or maladjustment) rather than on illuminating how children construe and cope with significant changes in their family. More recently, studies have emerged that begin to summarize the way that children view and cope with changes in their family following divorce. Though still underdeveloped, this area of research includes studies that examine (a) experiential effects of divorce, (b) developmental effects, and (c) intervention effects on children’s perceptions of divorce and related changes. The studies range from nonexperimental designs with descriptive results to experimental designs utilizing interview data and children’s drawings.

EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCE IN CHILDREN’S UNDERSTANDING OF DIVORCE

When the verbal understandings of divorce by school-aged children from divorced and intact families have been compared, they appear largely indistinguishable (Horm-Wingerd,

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Groves, & Nekovei, 1992; Mazur, 1993). However, comparisons of family drawings suggest that divorce may impact children's internal representations of family. Specifically, studies have shown that children with separated or divorced parents are more likely to exclude family members from family drawings (Dunn, O'Connor, & Levy, 2002; Isaacs, Leon, & Kline, 1987; Isaacs & Levin, 1984; Spigelman, Spigelman, & Engleson, 1992).

Studies that have taken a more descriptive or qualitative approach to the role of experience in shaping children's views of divorce and family have tended to sample very widely in age (e.g., 5–16 years in Smart, 2002) and have not included a control group. From the children's vantage points, parents' supportiveness of, and cooperation with, one another were key ingredients in reducing the level of stress stemming from financial, residential, and social changes (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003; Moxnes, 2003). Alternatively, parents who involved the children in their conflict and communication difficulties provided a pressing concern for the children (Butler et al., 2003; Oppawsky, 1989; Smith & Gollop, 2001; Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003; Taylor, 2001). Wishes for parental reunion also emerged in children's accounts (Jennings & Howe, 2001; Oppawsky, 1989).

Few studies have sought to summarize children's attributions for divorce or their postdivorce perceptions of parents. Two studies utilizing interview methods found negative changes in children's perceptions of their father (or nonresident parent) following divorce, with children describing fathers as more blameworthy and less aware of children's feelings than mothers (Butler et al., 2003; Jennings & Howe, 2001). However, the negative views of the father depended on the level of parental conflict and the quality of the predivorce parent–child relationship (Butler et al., 2003; Pruett & Pruett, 1999).

EFFECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DIVORCE

Compared to the more organized explanations offered by older children (Jennings & Howe, 2001), a younger sample (ages 2.5–7) produced mostly vague or confused definitions of divorce (Pruett & Pruett, 1999), limited by their cognitive and verbal developmental level. Mazur (1993) found robust developmental differences in her study of 5- to 10-year-olds, with older children exhibiting more realistic attitudes toward marriage and divorce than their younger counterparts. Similarly, Cohen and Ronen's study of children's drawings (1999) found that, with time, earlier stages of young (4- to 6-year-old) children's denial and fantasy were replaced with greater comprehension of the divorce and emotional acceptance.

Such studies suggest that development influences the way that children conceptualize divorce, but a comprehensive picture of developmental influences is still lacking. Despite clinical concerns for the effects of divorce on young children, we know the least about children's understandings of divorce prior to age 5.

EFFECTS OF INTERVENTION IN CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DIVORCE

A variety of interventions have been developed to reduce the impact of separation and divorce on children—ranging from divorce education programs, to mediation services, to school-based programs for children of divorce, to Special Masters programs for high-conflict parents, and so on. A small but growing number of interventions have been evaluated for their efficacy in terms of children's adjustment and coping skills. A

school-based program for children produced gains in children's self-reported acceptance and understanding of changes in their families, as well as other signs of adaptation reported by parents, teachers, and group leaders (see Pedro-Carroll, 1997, for a summary). A preventive intervention program for children fostered perceived competence, an internal locus of control, and decreased depression—all based on child reporting (Garvin, Leber, & Kalter, 1991). An intervention program for divorced mothers showed reductions in mother and child reports of children's internalizing and externalizing problems, although only the effects on externalizing problems were maintained at follow-up (Wolchik et al., 2000; Wolchik et al., 2002).

Given the number of interventions that have emerged to ease the deleterious effects of adversarial divorce on families, there is surprising scarcity in what we know about the direct or indirect benefits for children's adaptation. Outside of general measures of child adjustment, we know even less about the impact of intervention on children's understanding of divorce.

AIMS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The primary focus of this study was to illuminate the nature of young children's understandings of divorce and family-related changes—a less studied facet of children's adjustment to parental divorce. By sampling a narrow age band from preschool to the early elementary school years, we aimed to make more precise observations about the way that young children think about parental divorce and about their concerns. Using both verbal (i.e., interview) and nonverbal methods (i.e., drawings, semi-structured play), we sought to derive a more complete story about the ways that children make sense of and cope with divorce. The study's design was an expansion of a smaller pilot study (Pruett & Pruett, 1999), which looked at young children's understandings of divorce qualitatively, but included no quantitative measures.

The study we report is embedded within a larger longitudinal preventive intervention study—The Collaborative Divorce Project (CDP). The CDP offered separating and divorcing parents a comprehensive program of wraparound services provided by a public/private partnership between the state of Connecticut judiciary, Court Support Services Division, the Family Bar, and foundation-supported clinician/researchers. There were seven components to the intervention, described in detail elsewhere (Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005). The intervention included an orientation to the divorce process within the legal system, psycho-educational parenting classes conducted by co-parenting counselors (a doctoral-level clinician and a court services counselor), and a series of meetings with the co-parenting counselors in which the counselors served as consultants and mediators—helping parents to understand their children's developmental needs, develop parenting plans, and resolve disputes.

A key purpose of the CDP was to evaluate how a parent-focused intervention aided children's adjustment to the divorce. Thus, a secondary goal of the present study was to evaluate intervention effects on this subjective aspect of children's adjustment. We hypothesized that the intervention would deepen children's comprehension of divorce and related experiences and would enhance their emotional adjustment to familial changes—allowing them to be more expressive and less avoidant of the topic. Drawing a subsample of children (ages 3.5 to 7.5) from the larger CDP, we made exploratory comparisons of intervention and control group children to test these hypotheses.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Sampling methods and procedures for the larger CDP have been described elsewhere (Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004; Pruett et al., 2005). Families were recruited from two court districts in Connecticut upon filing for divorce or a court action. Inclusion criteria included: (a) a child 6 years or under in the family who was the biological child of both parties, (b) no substantial history of parental substance use, and (c) no significant history of physical spousal or child abuse within the family. This information was determined by a brief screening tool, administered to parents separately. Approximately 60 percent of all parents who were contacted were eligible and chose to participate, yielding a total sample size of 161 families. Families were randomly assigned to receive either a preventive intervention or “treatment as usual” from the court support services. Questionnaire data were collected as families entered the legal system (baseline), 6 months later, and then again 15–18 months after legal proceedings began. Parents were paid 50 dollars for their participation at each assessment.

A sample of 41 children from 41 families (i.e., 25 percent of the total sample) was drawn from the larger project to participate in a home-based child assessment, which took place between 18–24 months after the intervention began (which lasted approximately 4 months). For the assessment, we targeted children between 3.5 and 7.5 years of age which enabled us to focus on younger children while still ensuring a basic level of verbal fluency. Custodial parents of eligible children were telephoned and asked permission for their children’s participation.

The sample was evenly divided between boys ($n = 22$) and girls ($n = 19$), with a mean age of 5.6 years ($SD = 1.1$) and median age of 5.45. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (85.4 percent), and the remaining 14.6 percent of the sample was biracial or mixed race. The majority of the children came from lower or lower-middle socioeconomic status families; for example, 37.9 percent of the parents earned less than \$25,000 per year, and 72 percent earned less than \$50,000 per year. Most parents had completed high school (29.3 percent) or partial college/specialized training (41.5 percent) as their highest educational level. Almost half (43.9 percent) of the children were only children, and the rest were the youngest in their family (i.e., 29.3 percent = second child, 14.6 percent = third child, 12.2 percent = fourth child). The mother was the primary custodial parent for 80.5 percent of the children; the father was the primary custodial parent for 12.2 percent of the children; custody was shared for the remaining 7.3 percent.

The final sample consisted of 28 children from the original intervention group and 13 children from the original control group. It proved difficult to obtain permission from control group parents for their children’s participation, who typically said that they wanted to “put the experience behind them.” Although we aimed to draw a random subsample from the original sample, we ultimately had to use a convenience sample for the control group because so many control group parents declined to participate. Intervention families seemed less in need to “protect” their children from any potentially negative effects of the assessment experience, either because the court process had been less harrowing for them or because they were more committed to the project. There were no differences between intervention and control group children in terms of gender, age, or ethnicity and no family differences in terms of parents’ socioeconomic status, education, or level of parental conflict.

PROCEDURES

Three interviewers conducted the assessments—a senior child and adolescent psychiatrist and two child and family psychologists. Each interviewer conducted and rated several assessments in the presence of another interviewer, so that fidelity in research protocol could be achieved and interrater reliability could be measured. The assessments were audio-taped and transcribed in order to retrieve responses to specific questions and play themes. Interviewers were blind to experimental group assignments (intervention vs. control).

Assessments were conducted in the home of the primary residential parent. Parents identified a quiet room for the assessment, in which only the interviewer and child were present. Given the age of the sample and the need to establish children's expressive language competence, the assessment began with a simple developmental screen of language comprehension and fund of knowledge. The child was then instructed to draw, using supplied paper and markers: (1) anything they would like, (2) a picture of a person, and (3) a picture of a person of the other gender (if not already depicted). Later in the assessment, after playing, the children were asked also to draw (4) a picture of their family, and (5) a picture of divorce.

Next, the child was asked to depict, through play, a day in their life, from wake-up to bed-down, when they saw both parents, using toys and dolls brought by the interviewer. Two different playhouses were supplied with appropriate complements of furniture, adult female and male dolls, child dolls, and pet figures. Toys provided also included a vehicle for interhome transportation, a policeman with police car, telephones, suitcases, a treasure chest, and a toy Band-Aid. The children were invited to set up the houses in any way they wished. If needed, instructions were repeated for the child to "play out a day from beginning to end."

At the end of the play, the interviewer asked the child a series of direct questions: (1) What does "divorce" mean? (2) What is a lawyer? What do they do? (3) What is a judge? What do they do? (4) What do you want lawyers or judges to know, to make divorce easier or better for families and children? (5) If you were the judge, what would you say to your parents?

As the home assessment drew to a close, children were given the opportunity to say anything they would like about what had been discussed and played about. Exit discussions were used to review the experience with the child and to assist the parent with any questions that arose in the course of the visit. The home assessments averaged 1.5 hours in length.

MEASURES

Both continuous and categorical measures were employed in the present study. For each of the categorical measures, we utilized a "grounded" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or inductive approach to develop a coding system that captured the variety of responses generated by the participating children. All continuous measures were based upon mean ratings from two trained raters. For continuous variables, interrater reliability was estimated using intraclass correlations for absolute agreement. For categorical variables, interrater reliability was estimated using Cohen's Kappa. Discrepant ratings of categorical data were reconciled to achieve 100 percent agreement. Estimates of interrater reliability are listed below.

Perceptions of Divorce. We assessed both the content and quality of children's perceptions of divorce. The content of children's verbal definitions of "divorce" were coded using

the following categories: (a) change in living arrangements, (b) change in parents' relationship, (c) negative parental behavior or parental conflict, (d) negative emotions or internal state, (e) no response or irrelevant response (Kappa = .70).

Quality ratings of children's understandings of divorce were based on an overall evaluation of the clarity, detail, expressiveness, and openness (versus defensiveness) of the child's responses. Two interviewers rated (a) the quality of the child's verbal definition of "divorce" (ICC = .91) and (b) the quality of the child's divorce drawing (ICC = .88). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 = *irrelevant or no response* to 4 = *highly complex response, combining internal, external, and/or relational aspects of divorce*.

Perceptions of Family. Given the present controversy that surrounds the interpretation and validity of children's drawings (e.g., Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000), we restricted our analysis of the family drawing to three straightforward, dichotomous measurements: (a) inclusion or exclusion of the mother, (b) inclusion or exclusion of the father, and (c) togetherness versus separateness of the parents (Kappa = 1.00 for all three measures). With regard to (c), parents were coded as "together" in the family drawing when they were drawn side by side, without separation by another figure or object.

In addition to the drawing measures, the overall quality of the children's perception of the father (i.e., the nonresidential parent for the majority of the sample) was rated by two interviewers, across the entire home assessment (ICC = .49). This rating measured clarity, detail, expressiveness, and openness (versus defensiveness) and was made on a 4-point scale—from 0 = *perception of father is avoided or non-discernable* to 3 = *perception of father is clear and differentiated, and integrates both positive and negative aspects*.

Perceptions of Lawyers and Judges. The content of children's verbal definitions of a "lawyer" was coded according to three categories that emerged from the data: (a) authority figure, (b) helping figure, (c) no response or irrelevant response (Kappa = .89). The content of children's verbal definitions of a "judge" was coded using four categories: (a) authority figure, (b) helping figure, (c) person who exhibits certain behaviors (e.g., whacks a hammer), and (d) no response or irrelevant response (Kappa = .88).

Children's Advice for Lawyers, Judges, and Parents. Children's advice for lawyers and judges ("to make divorce easier/better for families and children") was categorized as: (a) help parents reconcile/get along, (b) grant children's wishes in residential arrangements, (c) support the divorce, or (d) no response or irrelevant response (Kappa = .69). Children's advice for parents ("if you were the judge") was categorized as: (a) reconcile/get along, (b) grant children's wishes in residential arrangements, or (c) no response or irrelevant response (Kappa = .71).

Play Themes and Play Quality. Seven general play themes were identified from interviewer notes and transcriptions of the play sequence. These themes were: (a) back-and-forth travel between mom's house and dad's house, (b) differences between mom's house and dad's house, (c) reunion fantasies, (d) loss of father, (e) loss (other than father), (f) security and protection, and (g) damage and conflict (Kappa = .65).

The quality of the child's play sequence was made on a 4-point scale. This measure was designed to tap the child's ability to use imaginative play to express and cope with internal and external processes associated with divorce (ICC = .53). Play sequences reflecting a

high level of internal resources and adaptation in the child were identified as those with more fully developed themes and better affect regulation. The scale ranged from 0 = *no play sequence or minimally developed play sequence* to 3 = *rich and coherent play sequence with well developed themes, discernable (and non-disorganizing) affect, and no play disruptions*.

RESULTS

Descriptive results for the overall sample will be presented first, followed by exploratory tests of intervention effects. Quantitative findings will be elaborated upon through qualitative descriptions of children's responses.

PERCEPTIONS OF DIVORCE

Frequencies for children's verbal definitions of divorce are listed in Table 1. The majority of the children (74.5 percent) were able to give coherent explanations of divorce, with the most frequent response (25.5 percent) referring to changes in living arrangements. For example, one child explained that divorce is "when parents don't live together." The second most common definition (21.3 percent) revolved around parents' negative emotions or attitudes toward one another. For example, children described divorce as: "They don't like each other," and "Divorce has lots of anger and it causes hurt." Less frequent responses referred to changes in the parental relationship (e.g., "Somebody gets married and not married anymore") or to negative parental behavior or conflict (e.g., "Yelling together at each other").

Table 1
Frequencies of Children's Responses to Direct Questions

<i>Question</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Intervention %</i>	<i>Control %</i>
What is Divorce?	Change in Living Arrangements	25.5	28.6	30.8
	Change in Parents' Relationship	14.9	21.4	7.7
	Negative Parental Behavior/Conflict	12.8	14.3	0.0
	Negative Emotions or Internal State	21.3	7.1	30.8
	Vague, Irrelevant, or No Response	25.5	28.6	30.8
What is a Lawyer?	Authority Figure	9.8	10.7	7.7
	Helping Figure	14.6	14.3	15.4
	Vague, Irrelevant, or No Response	76.6	75.0	76.9
What is a Judge?	Authority Figure	26.8	25.0	30.8
	Helping Figure	7.3	7.1	7.7
	Person with Certain Behaviors	12.2	14.3	7.7
	Vague, Irrelevant, or No Response	53.7	53.6	53.8
Lawyer/Judge Advice?	Help Parents Reconcile/Get Along	12.2	7.1	23.1
	Grant Children's Wishes re: Residence	9.8	14.3	0.0
	Support the Divorce	12.2	14.3	7.7
	Vague, Irrelevant, or No Response	65.9	64.3	69.2
Parent Advice?	Reconcile/Get Along	9.7	3.6	23.1
	Grant Children's Wishes re: Residence	7.3	10.7	0.0
	Vague, Irrelevant, or No Response	82.9	85.7	76.9

Only 15.4 percent of the children gave a complex explanation of divorce involving more than one of the response categories. One of these children (age 6) explained: “It starts with love, then you don’t live together, then you get unmarried, then you love other people, go back and back and back and forth and back and forth.” As he chanted the last phrase, he picked up a Slinky from his own toy box and slowly stretched it, gesturing toward the playhouses on either side of him. With the Slinky fully extended, he concluded, “and then . . . you break.” With that, he let the Slinky snap close and crash to the floor between the houses.

PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY

We assessed three aspects of children’s family schemas, as revealed through their family drawings (see Table 2). Four of the 41 participants refused to complete the family drawing, electing instead to draw something or someone else. Of the children who did complete the family drawing, nearly 92 percent included their mothers, but only 62.2 percent included their fathers—a significant difference, based on a paired-samples *t* test ($t = 3.17, p < .01$). Interestingly, only 24.3 percent of the children drew their parents together, suggesting that most of the children had (at least on some level) undergone realistic shifts in their internal representations of changes to the family.

Next, we conducted chi-square analyses to examine the independence between parental inclusions in the family drawing and residential arrangement (i.e., mother, father, or shared). A significant chi-square was found for mother’s inclusion and residential arrangement: ($\chi^2[2, N = 37] = 10.6, p < .01$). As seen in Table 2, nearly all of the children who lived primarily with their mother or with both parents depicted their mothers in the family drawing, while half of the children who lived primarily with their father did so. In contrast, inclusion of the father was independent of residential arrangement—he was included in about half of the drawings, regardless of the living arrangement.

In general, perceptions of the father emerged more clearly and with greater range in this study compared with our pilot study. Feelings of connectedness and longing for the father were palpable among many children. When one 6-year-old girl added her father into the family drawing, she shouted, “I miss him *so* much!” She then dramatized her upcoming reunion with her father—hugging herself and repeating, “I love you! I love you!” A 5-year-old boy felt he had to choose between his parents for the family drawing. Ultimately, he drew himself and his father, adding, “I’m smiling because I’m with my dad.” Several children expressed concern or empathy for their fathers. For instance, one girl asked the

Table 2
Frequencies of Family Drawing Depictions by Group and Residential Arrangement

Measure	Group			Primary Residence		
	Total %	Intervention %	Control %	Mother %	Father %	Shared %
Mother Included	91.9	88.5	100	97	50	100
Father Included	62.2	61.5	63.6	65	50	50
Parents Drawn Together	24.3	26.9	18.2	26	0	50

Note: Frequencies are based on the 37 participants (90.2% of the sample) who completed the family drawing.

interviewer to turn off the tape recorder when she talked about “missing Dad, but not that much. I don’t want to hurt my dad’s feelings.” Still other children conveyed anger toward their father over his absence, often blaming him for the dissolution of the family. A 7-year-old girl declared, “I never want to see my father again, except if he’s back with my mom. Then I won’t be angry at all.” With the toy houses and figures, she played sequences of “squishing” the dad to death.

Attitudes toward the mother were less varied. There were some children who expressed anger toward their mothers, as in the case of a 5.5-year-old boy who enacted themes of aggression toward the mother doll in his play. But more typically, the children seemed to bestow positive regard upon the mother and a preference for her over the father. A 5-year-old child living with his father expressed wanting “more time with Momma.” He delved into the play by arranging all of the toy furniture in the mother doll’s house, leaving none for the father doll.

PERCEPTIONS OF LAWYERS AND JUDGES

Overall, the children in this study displayed a lack of information or confusion about lawyers and judges and their roles in divorce. As presented in Table 1, nearly 77 percent of the children did not give a clear and relevant description of a lawyer and nearly 54 percent were unable to give a clear and relevant description of a judge.

Of the coherent, pertinent definitions given, children primarily described lawyers and judges as authority figures. As one child explained, “A lawyer is your boss. He tells you stuff you have to do. If not, he’ll fire you.” Judges were often seen as ultimate authorities. For example, “The judge is someone who decides who you *really* will live with. The lawyer doesn’t know.” To a lesser extent, children viewed lawyers and judges as helping figures (e.g., “Judges and lawyers try to help parents get back together.” “[Lawyers] help Moms and Dads get away from each other.”). Still other children defined judges in terms of stereotypical behaviors (e.g., “He whacks the hammer on the table.”).

ADVICE FOR LAWYERS AND JUDGES

The children were given the opportunity to tell the grown-ups what they needed. Most of the sample (65.9 percent) was unable or unsure as to how to advise lawyers and judges—a role that is both perhaps unfamiliar and abstract for this age group. Some took the opportunity to assert their wishes in terms of living arrangements: “If [Mom and Dad] lived next to each other we could just walk over.” But most of the advisements that were given were split between suggestions to help parents reconcile or get along and suggestions to support the parental divorce. One child proposed: “Say this to Moms and Dads: ‘Do you love each other?’ And then they *have* to say yes, and then give them some chances [not to divorce].” Another child counseled, “Please make it so they could try to get along.” Other children recommended that lawyers and judges facilitate their parents’ divorce. One said: “Tell mom and dad to marry someone else. Two divorced people should’ve married someone else from the beginning.”

ADVICE FOR PARENTS, “IF YOU WERE THE JUDGE”

Only 17 percent of the sample responded directly to this question, suggesting that it was too difficult or simply not useful for many children this age. Nonetheless, the responses we

did get were illuminating. Of the children who imagined themselves as judge, some advised parents to get along or reconcile (e.g., “I wish there was a law that judges could make so parents could get back together after they ‘get over it.’ Can divorce ever get undone?”). Others focused on granting children’s residential preferences (e.g., “If I were the judge . . . I would pick the mom.”).

PLAY THEMES

The play themes grouped themselves into seven distinguishable categories. Frequencies for play themes are reported in Table 3: 41.5 percent of the children expressed one theme during the play sequence, 46.3 percent of the children expressed two or more themes, and 12.2 percent of the children expressed no themes because they were either unwilling or unable to engage in the play task. Reunion fantasies were the most common play theme depicted, followed by themes of damage and conflict, security and protection, and back-and-forth travel between households.

The strength of the reunion wish sometimes eclipsed the dual house play, with children achieving family reunification under one roof. Harmonious family scenes with moms and dads kissing, hugging, cooperating, driving, watching TV, and sleeping together were common. A 4.5-year-old boy created a storyline around a magical treasure chest, in which all family members popped out and were seated together around a table. A 6.5-year-old child simply pushed the houses together and declared, “I wish my houses were like that [touching].” Then, dissatisfied with the side-by-side arrangement, he elected to place one house on top of the other.

Themes of damage and conflict, and security and protection were also prominent in the children’s play. Violence and hostility between mother and father dolls pervaded a 6-year-old boy’s play—with recurring physical altercations, break-ins, and destruction of one another’s houses. Just when a 4-year-old arranged and identified all of the furniture and figures, an avalanche struck, killing everyone. Another 4-year-old depicted a fight between two daddy dolls, which resulted in both being thrown in jail by the policeman. The policeman, in fact, was included in many scenarios, typically as an agent of safety and proper conduct.

Table 3
Frequencies of Play Themes

<i>Play Theme</i>	<i>Group</i>		
	<i>Total</i> %	<i>Intervention</i> %	<i>Control</i> %
Back-and-Forth Between Parents’ Houses	24.4	17.9	38.5
Differences between Parents’ Houses	19.5	21.4	15.4
Reunion Fantasy	41.5	39.3	46.2
Loss of Father	12.2	7.1	23.1
Loss (Other)	17.1	17.9	15.4
Security and Protection	29.3	32.1	23.1
Damage and Conflict	34.1	28.6	46.2

Note: Frequencies reflect the percentage of participants who expressed each theme during the play sequence. 46% of the total sample expressed more than one play theme, thus the columns do not total 100%.

The toll of transitioning between homes was clearly depicted. As one child explained, “Back-and-forth makes me sick. I want to throw up—both ways.” Another child repeated a mantra throughout the play: “Too long a drive, too long a drive.” A 5-year-old girl transformed the toy Band-Aid into a tool to help the dolls figure out where they belonged: “This [Band-aid] tells you if you’re in the right house.” Another child focused so entirely on the ordeal of the travel process—stuffing each and every play item into the toy vehicle or her pockets, and then “driving” all over the house—that as soon as the dolls arrived at “dad’s house,” it was time to go back to “mom’s.”

EXPLORATORY TESTS OF INTERVENTION EFFECTS

Perceptions of Divorce. We tested for intervention effects on the quality of children’s definitions and drawings of divorce using analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs), with age and residential arrangement treated as covariates. After removing the effects of the covariates, we found no significant intervention effects on the two dependent measures. Examining main effects of the two covariates, residential arrangement was not significantly related to either measure, but age was significantly related to both the quality of the divorce definition ($F[1, 37] = 7.13, p < .05$) and the quality of the divorce drawing ($F[1, 37] = 12.31, p < .01$). Higher quality of children’s definitions and drawings of divorce was associated with older age (divorce definition: $r = .39, p < .05$; divorce drawing: $r = .50, p < .01$).

Perceptions of Family. We examined whether intervention and control children differed in the three family drawing measures using Fisher’s exact test for independence. The probabilities were not significant, suggesting that the group was independent of these measures.

We found a significant intervention effect on the quality of perceptions of the father, after controlling for the effects of age and residential arrangement using ANCOVA ($F[1, 37] = 9.51, p < .01$; intervention group: adjusted $M = 2.22, SD = .15$; control group: adjusted $M = 1.41, SD = .22$). The main effects for the two covariates were not significant. Qualitatively, the children from intervention families seemed to have more moderate and integrated perceptions of their fathers—often fluctuating between longing and sadness on the one hand and positive affect on the other. Children from control families seemed more preoccupied with sad, angry, or ambiguous depictions of their fathers in narrative and play. This suggests that the intervention made progress toward fostering children’s cognitive-emotional adjustment to the divorce.

Perceptions of Lawyers and Judges. Using chi-square tests, we evaluated whether intervention and control children differed in the way they defined lawyers and judges. There were no significant results, indicating no relationship between group membership and children’s perceptions of these individuals.

Advice for Lawyers, Judges, and Parents. Again, chi-square tests were used to assess differences between intervention and control groups in the types of advice they offered to grown-ups. The chi-square pertaining to advice for lawyers and judges was nonsignificant, but the chi-square pertaining to advice for parents (“if you were the judge”) was significant: $\chi^2(3, N = 41) = 8.40, p < .05$. Table 1 displays response percentages for intervention vs. control group children. All of the control group children who gave a clear and relevant response wanted parents to get along or reconcile, whereas the intervention children wanted

parents to listen to their preferences in living arrangements. Similarly, there was a tendency for control group children to suggest reconciliation or improved relations between parents, while intervention group children offered a wider array of suggestions. Together, these data hint at a possible pattern in which intervention children were more accepting of the reality of the divorce and better able to contemplate a range of changes that could improve the situation for themselves, beyond parental reconciliation.

Play Themes and Play Quality. To examine possible intervention effects on children's play themes, we tested for independence between group membership and individual play themes using Fisher's exact test. There were no significant probabilities, suggesting that intervention and control children did not differ in frequencies of specific play themes.

There was, however, a significant intervention effect on the quality of the play sequence, based on ANCOVA results ($F[1, 37] = 4.24, p < .05$, intervention group: adjusted $M = 2.13, SD = .16$; control group: adjusted $M = 1.53, SD = .24$). There were no significant main effects for the two covariates—age and living arrangement. We observed that children in the intervention condition were more engaged in the play as a whole, whereas children in the control condition displayed more play disruptions and shorter play sequences.

DISCUSSION

With the experience of parental divorce so common in childhood, we aimed this investigation toward two lesser known aspects of divorce repercussions for children. First, we focused on children's subjective expressions and representations of divorce, rather than on more traditional measures of adjustment such as inventories of behavior, in order to illuminate the ways in which children understand, process, and cope with changes brought on by parental divorce. Second, we focused our study on young children in the preschool to early elementary school years. Most existing studies of children's perceptions of divorce have sampled broadly in age, have ignored children below ages 5 or 6, and have failed to draw conclusions about developmental influences. By limiting our sample to ages 3 to 7, we expected to discern patterns that were more precise and pertinent to young children of divorce.

Besides elucidating young children's views of the divorce experience, the study was designed to assess the indirect benefits of a preventive intervention program for divorcing parents. Relative to the number of divorce intervention programs that exist, there is surprisingly little empirical information about the ways that such programs help children. Drawing a convenience sample from a larger study with randomized assignment to condition, we made exploratory comparisons between intervention and control group children.

HOW DO YOUNG CHILDREN VIEW DIVORCE AND RELATED CHANGES IN THEIR FAMILY?

We began with a basic question: How do young children conceptualize divorce? By and large, the 3- to 7-year-olds in our study seemed to hold accurate, simple understandings of divorce. Not surprisingly, most of our young participants defined divorce in terms of

practical changes in family logistics. References to parents' negative feelings or attitudes toward each other were also fairly common. If we consider our results next to those of Jennings and Howe (2001) for 8- to 14-year-olds, it is fair to say that, with age, children's understandings move from more conspicuous features of divorce (e.g., physical separation) to more complicated root causes (e.g., parents' incompatibility). The fact that children in our pilot study (Pruett & Pruett, 1999) displayed greater ignorance or confusion about divorce than children in the present study may be a reflection of the immaturity of the former (i.e., that sample's age started at 2.5 years) or a sign that the intervention (indirectly) provided children with psychologically useful information.

Through collecting family drawings, we attempted to sample portions of children's internal representations of divorce and their postdivorce families. We confined our inquiry to parental inclusions and parental togetherness—variables that allowed less wiggle-room in interpretation than other aspects of children's drawings. Mothers were rarely excluded from the family drawings, except among children living primarily with their fathers, who were equally likely to include or exclude her. These data suggest that the perception of a mother's indispensability or centrality to the postdivorce family is not universal, but is at least partially contingent on living arrangements. Interestingly, about half of the children in every living situation—including father-custody families—viewed fathers as inessential (or problematic) enough to omit him. Together, studies of family drawings among children of divorce, including our own, paint an inconsistent picture of fathers' roles in the postdivorce family. But, our data intimate that living arrangements may influence children's family schemas in a substantial way.

The pattern we found for parental inclusions in the family drawing was supported by parental depictions in other realms of the assessment. Just as the father's inclusion in the family drawing was more variable than the mother's, children's portrayals of their father in the play and in response to direct questions were more variable than their portrayals of their mother. As in previous studies (Butler et al., 2003; Jennings & Howe, 2001), we found children's attitudes toward mothers to be comparatively positive and uncomplicated. Attitudes toward fathers, on the other hand, flexed between positive and negative poles and more often included blame for the divorce. Fathers in this sample, it seems, have much to overcome in order to be perceived as vital by their children after divorce.

Somewhat surprisingly, less than one-quarter of our participants drew their parents together in the family drawing. We view this as healthy indication of the children's adjustment to (or beginning adjustment to) a reconfiguration of their parents' relationship. At the same time, wishes for parental reconciliation were amply portrayed in the children's play. With respect to divorce, young children may be in a state of mind that conflates denial and fantasy with acceptance and realism. This may not come across to researchers, clinicians, or court-based evaluators, however, if only one type of assessment tool (e.g., only drawings, or only play) is used. A fuller, more accurate picture of children's views, wishes, or worries is more likely to arise when multiple methodologies are used in concert.

It is not obvious why Dunn and colleagues (2002) found that young children of divorce tended to draw parents together, while we found the opposite. These contradictory results could be attributable to differences in time elapsed since parental separation or to intervention effects in our study. In retrospect, we also wondered whether we were overly strict in our coding of parental togetherness and therefore decided to recode drawings with children (i.e., participants) situated between parents as "together." Parental togetherness

was still unrelated to group membership, but frequencies increased slightly: total sample = 29.7 percent; intervention = 28.5 percent; control = 23.1 percent.

WHAT CONCERNS OR HOPES ARE MOST SALIENT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN FOLLOWING PARENTAL DIVORCE?

Our indirect method for learning about young children's wishes and concerns—identification of play themes—was far more fruitful than direct questioning. The direct questions were likely too complicated, abstract, or fraught for this age group. The high frequency of irrelevant responses we received to direct questions is instructive: our findings should admonish clinicians, researchers, or evaluators from over-relying on verbal methods in assessing young children. In contrast, children's play was quite revealing. As observed in other studies (Jennings & Howe, 2001; Oppawsky, 1989), the children's play fervently expressed their wishes for parental reunion; nearly 42 percent of the sample expressed a version of this theme during the play. Play themes of damage and conflict, security and protection, and back-and-forth travel between homes were also recurrent. Through storytelling, therefore, the children told us that divorce (and consequential changes in their daily life) left them feeling vulnerable and beleaguered, and hoping to return to a state of order and cohesion in their families. The children's play spoke volumes that could not be gleaned through a verbal interview.

HOW CAN COLLABORATION-FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS FOR DIVORCING PARENTS BENEFIT YOUNG CHILDREN?

We hypothesized that, if the intervention was helpful in limiting the negative effects of the divorcing process on children, we would find differences between intervention and control group children in one or more outcome measures. Again, tests of intervention effects were considered exploratory. Approximately 2 years after parents filed for divorce and the intervention began (a year and a half or more since it concluded), the treatment groups appeared more similar than different. For example, there were no group differences in the quality of children's definitions or drawings of divorce or in frequencies of play themes.

There were, however, two noteworthy distinctions between groups. First, children whose parents had received the intervention conveyed clearer, more detailed, and better balanced images of their father. These children also displayed a greater integration of positive and negative affective regard—such as longing and anger—when talking or playing about their fathers. Children in the control group tended to be more vague or negative when rendering their fathers in the assessment. Again, we interpret this as encouraging evidence that the intervention served to promote children's cognitive-emotional adaptation to the divorce.

Second, we observed the play sequences of the intervention children to be more coherent, richer in detail, and less prone to emotional disruption than those of the control children. The basic plot of the play sequence, which was structured through the research protocol, was a day in the life of a child of divorce. The children dramatized many idiosyncratic and creative family scenarios—some cheerful and some disturbing—within the boundaries of our instructions and materials. But because the stories and scenes revolved around postdivorce family life, we interpret the quality of the play as a reflection of the child's cognitive-affective coping in relation to the divorce. Higher ratings for the intervention group suggest that the intervention aided children's adjustment in an important way.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations pertain to the results and interpretations presented in this study. First, while the sample size is commensurate with similar studies of children's understandings of divorce, it is still relatively small, particularly for the control condition. The size imbalance between intervention and control groups limits confidence surrounding the intervention effects. Second, while our sample was drawn from a larger study that utilized random sampling, our control group was built mainly through convenience sampling due to the large number of refusals we received from control group parents. Given these two limitations, all tests of intervention effects would require replication within a larger, more controlled design. Third, mother residential arrangements were much more common in our sample than were father or shared living arrangements. A more equal representation of residential groups might have strengthened or altered the results we obtained regarding children's family drawings and living arrangements. Fourth, although we screened for basic language skills and controlled for age, non-age-related variability in children's verbal abilities may still have contributed to our results in ways that were not systematically evaluated. Fifth, as has been seen in other longitudinal preventive intervention studies (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005), the follow-up time may have been too brief for intervention effects to fully reveal themselves. For example, the positive effects of increased collaboration and decreased animosity between parents may be cumulative rather than immediate. If so, other signs of positive adjustment in children may appear at a later time period.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of divorce, children's views of their world—their home, family, and daily life—shift like tectonic plates. We sought to illuminate the beginning stages of this process by focusing on children's conceptualizations of divorce and related experiences shortly after marital dissolution. Young children are no less spared these changes than older children, although unlike older children, they are often not consulted in the legal process of divorce. Our findings suggest that young children often understand more about divorce than is commonly assumed and that they are actively coping with divorce-related changes. Children under age 8 fantasize about parental reunion, but they can also hold realistic attitudes about divorce as well. When young children's conceptualizations are assessed through multiple means—such as drawings, play, and interviews—it becomes clear that no single approach is adequate to fully represent their internal world. We found that direct verbal questioning led to more dead ends than did our nonverbal measures, which should caution future researchers, clinicians, or evaluators from overreliance on verbal interview methods with young children. Divorce interventions, such as the CDP, offer strategies to help parents better meet their children's needs at a time when parenting skills are under considerable stress. Exploratory analyses suggested that the intervention afforded children wider emotional access to a range of affect about their fathers and postdivorce family life, as well as wider cognitive access to a range of solutions to family problems. In these ways, efforts to raise parental awareness about young children's needs in the context of divorce may provide rather immediate pass-through benefits.

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