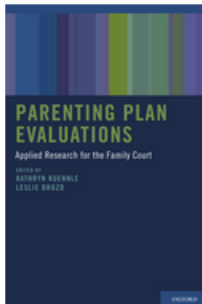


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Supporting Father Involvement in the Context of Separation and Divorce

Chapter: (p. 123) Supporting Father Involvement in the Context of Separation and Divorce

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Ellen: "He doesn't pay child support, so he doesn't get to see the kids when he wants."

John: "I don't get to see my kids, so the hell if I'm going to pay her child support."

Ronnie: "He never paid that much attention to the kids when we were married. Now he wants to see them. He's just doing that to pay less support, or to get me back for leaving. I'm not sure which."

Ryan: "I wasn't a very involved father. I loved my kids, but Ronnie had a death grip on their schedules, and on what I was or was not allowed to do, and how I was supposed to do it. It was easier just to back away. Now that we're divorcing, I can be the kind of father I always wanted to be."

In these and countless other examples, a standoff ensues, a cycle in which neither parent wants to capitulate to the other because the stakes are so high. The stakes ultimately concern each parent's place in the child's heart, but they are fought out in terms of sharing time with the children and precious financial assets. One result of these types of ongoing parental conflicts

may be reduced father involvement, as anger and bitterness become entrenched between parents, leaving the child at risk (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Solutions to these dilemmas lie in how father involvement and co-parenting get conceptualized and implemented in the context of parenting time and decision-making. The ambiguity inherent in such decisions when the court is left to make them was first poignantly depicted for popular audiences in the movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), and it continues to get played out in family court cases that involve the structure of children's living arrangements, overnights, and relocations, among other issues.

To provide a context for discussion of father engagement when parents separate or divorce, this chapter begins with three brief sections summarizing research on (p. 124) married and cohabiting couples. A burgeoning literature indicates that fathers play an important role in their children's development, a role that is often quite different than that of mothers. Further, a plethora of recent studies show that when parents have high levels of unresolved conflict, or cold and withdrawn relationships, their children are at risk for behavioral, social, and emotional symptoms, as well as difficulties meeting academic challenges in school. After developing and summarizing these studies as relevant background, some central issues of father involvement when couple relationships dissolve but co-parenting obligations continue will be considered:

- Dilemmas about continuing a collaborative co-parenting relationship even though the partners are in conflict with each other
- Special problems of father involvement associated with maternal gatekeeping and establishing overnights with children

Finally, an evidence-based intervention designed to support and enhance father involvement prior to separation and divorce is described, with suggestions about how it could be adapted for separating and divorcing couples.

The Impact of Father Engagement on Children's Development

In this chapter, father involvement connotes feeling responsible for and behaving responsibly toward the child; being emotionally engaged; being physically accessible; providing material support to sustain the child's needs; being involved in caring for the child; and/or exerting influence in childrearing decisions. In a recent conceptualization, Pleck (2010) defines these components as positive activity engagement, warmth-responsiveness, control, indirect care, and process responsibility (responsibility for indirect care such as scheduling appointments). The components are interrelated, especially the first three, while the latter two are more independent from each other and the others, indicating that there are various pathways to father involvement that matter for child development in novel, as well as compounding, ways.

Paralleling societal shifts in gender roles and partly in response to them, there has been an impressive increase in research concerning the critical role fathers play in their children's healthy development (see Lamb, 2010, for a comprehensive review). This research has advanced our understanding of the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives, regardless of whether the men live with their children. A majority of the studies found that across family structures, cultures, and living circumstances, when fathers are positively engaged with their children, the children derive cognitive, emotional, and social benefits in terms of adjustment and

resilience in the face of familial troubles and environmental risks and vulnerabilities. For example, one review of longitudinal studies indicated that children with involved fathers tend to have higher performance and verbal literacy skills, lower levels of emotional distress, and lower incidences of substance use, teen pregnancy, and delinquency (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2007). A summary of over 160 studies (Pruett, 2000), shown in Table 5.1, resulted in an extensive list of benefits accruing to children when fathers are positively engaged in their lives. (p. 125)

Table 5.1 Child Outcomes of Involved Fathering

Behavioral

Reduced contact with juvenile justice

Delay in initial sexual activity, reduced teen pregnancy

Reduced rate of divorce

Less reliance on aggressive conflict resolution

Educational

Higher grade completion, graduation rates, and income

Math competence in girls

Verbal strength in boys and girls (literacy)

Enjoy school more

Emotional/Social

Greater problem-solving competence and stress tolerance

Greater empathy and moral sensitivity; reduced gender stereotyping

Initiative and self-direction

Positive peer relationships

Unique Contributions of Paternal Parenting

When partners become parents, their gender as well as their role differences are often accentuated, leading to slightly or somewhat different parenting responses and behaviors.

Children will embrace these differences, but they also learn to “play up” the differences, creating a wedge between parents if such differences evoke anger and blame when they result in miscommunication, unmet expectations, and ultimately resentment (Pruett & Pruett, 2009). Understanding modal differences between parents in gendered behaviors and inclinations (*word of caution*: there are always individual differences as well, and they often take precedence) helps parents and legal professionals identify typical gender differences that often get attributed to personal failings of the ex-spouse.

By 6 weeks of age, babies respond differently to their father than their mother. In one study, when mothers approached and held their babies, the babies would partially close their eyes and relax their shoulders, and their heart rate slowed. By contrast, when approached by their fathers, the babies hunched their shoulders and opened their eyes wide, and their heart rates accelerated (Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995). Fathers were associated with novelty and excitement, mothers with calming nurturance. Further, mothers are likely to lift their babies consistently in the same manner—to their chests—while fathers’ approaches are unpredictable; they might roll the baby over or lift him or her into the crook of their arm. When a child is distressed, mothers tend to soothe, fathers to distract. Mothers often teach in their play; fathers tend to engage in more tactile and open-ended exploration. She prepares the child for relationships, focusing on social interactions as important for future success. He tends to explain his risk-taking, problem-solving, and frustration-tolerating behaviors as preparation for the “real world” children must enter. Fathers spend more time playing with their young children, even when they are the primary caretakers of those children. Although mothers spend more absolute time playing (p. 126) with their children, play is more prominent in father-child interactions, and the stimulation and novelty fathers introduce may render their play especially salient to their children (Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982). Fathers tend to demand exploration, and children respond, for example, by using more advanced speech patterns with their fathers than with their mothers. Fathers also discipline differently than mothers: they spend less time reasoning, use fewer words, and expect greater compliance more quickly; they use more imperatives and fewer reciprocal bargaining techniques; and they are more willing to confront their children and enforce discipline. These tendencies in gender differences translate into concrete behavioral differences: Fathers tend to activate and stimulate, emphasizing independence, competence, and frustration tolerance. Mothers, on the other hand, tend to regulate and soothe, helping their young children to navigate life’s challenges feeling cared for and secure. These gender differences extend throughout the early years of a child’s life (see Pruett, 2000, for a fuller explication of studies).

When Maternal and Paternal Differences Evolve into Conflict

Children benefit from parenting styles that typify typical paternal and maternal proclivities, especially if both styles are conducted within an overall frame of sensitivity to the child’s needs and limits and an overall acceptance of the other parent’s different style and parenting qualities (Pruett & Pruett, 2009). Married and cohabiting couples with different ideas and behavioral strategies concerning how to parent their children find themselves increasingly working out a co-parenting relationship, yet it is usually far more difficult to establish a collaborative co-parenting relationship when parents are living separately and in a state of conflict about financial and/or emotional aspects of their lives. For example, children respond to the novel and stimulating approach of fathers in ways that may cause difficulties in a divorcing family where

differences are accentuated and mistrusted. Consider this common theme heard in clinical consultations: Separated, co-parenting mothers attribute their children's return from the father's house "all jazzed" as a sign that he is not attending to his children's needs faithfully. He may be crossing a line in judgment, or he is often doing things differently than she would choose or desire. Sorting this out can be critical in deciding if a parenting plan is ill advised for the child versus uncomfortable for the parent to whom the child returns, but not necessarily a serious problem for the child.

Whether living together or apart, parents who fail to establish a satisfactory cooperative relationship place their children at risk. Parents with high levels of conflict and/or high levels of relationship unhappiness have children who are likely to be more aggressive, depressed, or both (Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005; Cummings & Keller, 2006; Harold, Aitken, & Shelton, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008). The mechanisms linking couple conflict with negative child outcomes include emotional distress at witnessing or becoming triangulated in parental fighting, but they also include a spillover from couple to parent-child relationships. It is difficult for both fathers and mothers to be warm and firm with their children when their relationship with their partners is not a source of support for them (Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006).

(p. 127) Co-Parenting in Divorcing Families

When parents dissolve their couple relationship, the co-parenting relationship becomes the focus of the distinct part of their relationship that must evolve into a new form but remain strong. It is generally accepted that it is beneficial for children if parents maintain a positive co-parenting relationship, except in situations in which involvement of one or both parents is not healthy or desirable for the family. When there is a history of severe drug or alcohol abuse, intimate partner (domestic) violence, or child abuse, parental access may be limited, supervised, or suspended in accord with children's best interests (Dalton, Carbon, & Olesen, 2003; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008).

Ongoing parental conflict is an indicator that a co-parenting alliance may be difficult or impossible to achieve. In divorcing families, it is more often father involvement that is limited when parents cannot cooperate. Although the focus of this chapter is on the benefits to children of active and positive father involvement in their life, that stance in no way implies that children require a male parent to develop social, emotional, and cognitive competence, as there is ample research to suggest otherwise (Silverstein, 2002). To the contrary, the argument presented turns on the empirically supported assumption that a second positively involved parent can provide added significant support for children's development. When the second parent is a male, it may offer unique protective factors to the child and family.

Successful co-parenting after separation or divorce requires that parents maintain a shared focus on their child's well-being even when they are not in a romantic or contractual relationship with each other. This requirement is typically translated in family court into encouraging or mandating that major decisions be made together (e.g., health care, education) and/or sharing parental responsibilities and division of time spent with the children. Additional components of co-parenting that broaden the opportunities to work with families and establish mutuality through parenting plans include (a) striving to agree on who their child is and what his or her

needs are; (b) expressly and implicitly valuing the importance of the other parent's contributions to childrearing; (c) recognizing gender differences that lead partners to think, feel, and behave in distinct ways with respect to childrearing; (d) allowing children's needs to dictate how conflicts get resolved; and (e) creating a "team" that extends beyond parallel parenting and commits to backing each other up when children need two firm but loving parents to hold them on course when they are veering off in some unknown or ill-informed direction (Pruett & Pruett, 2009). Parents may display a high level of sensitive responsiveness to a child individually, but they also may criticize, blame, or neglect the other parent in front of the child. This undermines the capacity of the co-parenting alliance to function as the child's safety net. Co-parenting can counteract compromised parenting styles and enhance the quality of parent-child relationships (Feinberg & Kan, 2008), thereby supporting the child's disrupted sense of security from the transition to separate households and family units (Nair & Murray, 2005).

Among the thorniest issues facing family courts are (a) how to encourage parents to cooperate in the face of hurt or conflict; (b) how to support both parents' role in the child's life without splitting the child's time and life arbitrarily in half; and (c) how to overcome barriers to ongoing father involvement created by social roles that establish mothers as primary caretakers, often right up to the point of a legal dispute. (p. 128) Faced with these dilemmas, family practitioners from legal and mental health professions have put their faith in the promise of co-parenting, without ample evidence regarding how it can best be implemented.

Research findings on co-parenting and father involvement in intact families may be useful in helping divorcing parents to design appropriate parenting plans. First, fathers may find it difficult to negotiate the kind of parenting plan they desire when their children are very young and their ex-partners want to remain the primary parent. Yet fathers who stay collaboratively involved during the first 3 months of a newborn's life also tend to be in relationships in which couple distress is less likely to spill over into co-parenting over the first year of the baby's life (McHale, 2007). In other words, fathers who stay the course despite rocky relationships with their partners—"resilient dads"—strengthen the bedrock of the co-parenting relationship. There is some evidence that men who are active from early on in their children's life experience hormonal (Storey, Walsh, Quinton, & Wynne-Edwards, 2000) and brain (Feldman, Swain & Mayes, 2005; Swain et al., 2008) changes that support their capacity to respond to and empathize with their child. Activating the nurturing potential in men early seems to support their ongoing parenting and co-parenting competence.

A father's involvement with his children is often contingent upon the mother's attitude towards, and expectations of, support from him (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007). Mothers are a force in co-parenting negotiations and compromises, and parenting plans should be constructed within this social reality.

Involvement as a Function of Quality over Quantity Time

One reality of maternal primacy in the family domain is that divorced fathers often are in court wanting more time with their child than they have spent historically or currently. In research concerning father involvement, there has been a shift from discussing the frequency or amount of time fathers spend with their children to assessing the quality of their involvement (Cowan,

Cowan, Cohen, Pruett, & Pruett, 2008; Lamb, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It has been shown that non-residential fathers' involvement may have less impact on their children than resident fathers' involvement due to differences in level of involvement or in characteristics of the men who remain living with their children (see Carlson & McLanahan, 2010; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Taylor, & Dickson, 2001). Although children benefit most from having fathers who are engaged in their care on a number of levels, research also has clearly indicated that it is the quality—not the quantity—of time that matters most to children's outcomes. Studies have not established the bare minimum quantity of time that supports ongoing parent-child relationships, nor will they ever likely do so, since what constitutes an acceptable minimum is a product of a number of factors that cannot all be accounted for simultaneously and in the same family: child age, gender, temperament, quality of attachment to each parent, proximity in living situation, and so on. In the absence of a bright-line decision marker, quantity as much or more than quality time continues to lie at the heart of legal disputes. These disputes are fueled by the fact that spending less time together causes distress to parent and/ (p. 129) or child and raises fears about whether they will be able to maintain closeness over time in the face of ongoing family transitions. On the other end of the spectrum, in terms of supporting time sharing, joint legal and physical custody research generally finds positive outcomes for parents and children compared to sole custody (see Pruett & Barker, 2009), though recent research suggests that shared parenting splits may work best only under cooperative conditions for school-age children (McIntosh, Wells, Smyth, & Long, 2008). Although the generalizations that can be justified from empirical data are relatively few, research offers more instructive guidelines than a generation ago, when exploration of how to turn the value of father involvement into a viable shared parenting arrangement began in earnest.

Summary points of the co-parental relationship:

- Research shows that father involvement is good for the child's and father's adjustment and for the strength of the co-parental relationship.
- However, father's involvement is strongly influenced by the mother's attitudes towards his competence and about his desirability as a parent for their child.
- There are multiple indicators of father involvement and co-parenting. Maintaining a broad definition opens doors for more types of shared arrangements to be adopted and reinforced.
- It is the quality of time and parenting—not the quantity—that is more highly related to closeness between parent and child. While some quantity is needed to establish sufficient opportunity to establish and maintain closeness, the minimum point has not been established. Similarly, no amount of time nearing equality has been established as helpful or harmful to children in general; individual considerations take precedence.

Two Factors that Place Fathers' Involvement with Young Children at Special Risk

It has been well established that children's adjustment with both parents influences their adjustment throughout life. Young children and fathers face particular risks to their relationship that place the child's adjustment in jeopardy early in the developmental trajectory. With the average marriage lasting 8 years in the United States, and unmarried relationships averaging a

shorter duration, a majority of families who are separating and divorcing have children under age 6 (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pruett & Jackson, 2002). Recently, researchers have focused on exploring two types of dynamics in families with young children that are focal points for contention and controversy in legal disputes: maternal gatekeeping and overnights in parenting plans for young children.

Maternal Gatekeeping

A reality in both married and divorced families is that the mother often functions as a gatekeeper in ways that can either facilitate or inhibit father-child relationships (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003) through her influence on his access (p. 130) and decision-making latitude. Gatekeeping is usually justified in terms of its protective function, keeping children appropriately safe from external dangers, but it also may serve as a vehicle for expression of maternal anger, fear, or distrust of fathers' parenting competence. While either or both parents may engage in gatekeeping behaviors, maternal gatekeeping is more commonly discussed due to women's traditional role as the primary caretaker and tendency toward more restrictive gatekeeping in comparison with fathers. In contrast, research has shown that positive, unrestrictive maternal gatekeeping is associated with higher levels of cooperation between parents, lower parental conflict and hostility, and increased father involvement (Pruett et al., 2007).

Characteristics of Gatekeeping

Although gatekeeping occurs between married as well as divorced parents, it is especially important to address it in separated and divorced parents, in which the father-child relationship is particularly vulnerable. Several recent studies have extended the knowledge of what characterizes maternal gatekeeping, its antecedents, and the effect it has on paternal involvement.

Using data from the Collaborative Divorce Project (Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005), a subsequent study of maternal gatekeeping behaviors sought to better understand patterns of gatekeeping, as well as to determine whether an intervention could reduce restrictive behaviors (Pruett et al., 2007). Among significant findings from the study, mothers' retrospective perceptions of their past marriage and supportiveness of the ex-spouse were directly associated with their gatekeeping behaviors following the divorce, as well as their perceptions of father involvement. Negative gatekeeping may be, in part, her payback for his treatment of her (not only the children) during the marriage. Positive gatekeeping (that which supports collaborative childrearing) was linked to the mother's belief that the father's involvement with the child is important and that it is her parental duty to facilitate it. The father's positive gatekeeping response was linked to his acknowledgment that the mother's role in his relationship to his child is a central one.

In addition, mothers were twice as likely to report ways in which they supported father involvement than ways they hindered access, while fathers viewed mothers as equally helping and hindering of contact with their children. Although men and women agreed that mothers were often helpful, mothers saw themselves as being more helpful than fathers did, suggesting that one mechanism for her frustration may be that she is not being appreciated and for his frustration that he does not view her as helpful as she claims.

A co-parenting intervention was implemented in the study that combined a brief psychoeducation program (6 hours) and court-assisted mediation to coach mothers and fathers to identify gatekeeping behaviors and work at greater cooperation. Mothers who participated in the intervention became four times more likely to acknowledge and describe ways in which they hindered paternal access. Their greater awareness led to more clarity about behaviors that hindered fathers' access to the children that they had not realized and often had not intended. The intervention also encouraged fathers to "step up to the plate" and take responsibility for knowing their children's needs and responding to them with personal initiative rather than leaving it to their ex-wives to orchestrate.

While gatekeeping is often prompted by mothers' feelings about fathers' competence, it also may be affected by mothers' own internal factors. Gaunt (2008) found (p. 131) that mothers who identified highly with their parental role and had low self-esteem were more likely to be restrictive gatekeepers. Similarly, father involvement may have more to do with fathers' own characteristics and beliefs about parenting than maternal beliefs and actions (Schoppe-Sullivan, Cannon, Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008). Assessing the extent to which gatekeeping is operating within a family, and for what reasons, may help evaluators and legal professionals promote parenting plans that are less likely to destabilize without the watchful eye of the court.

From the current research, the following conclusions can be reached about maternal gatekeeping:

- Mothers' retrospective opinions of their marriage may play a role in their gatekeeping behaviors.
- Restrictive maternal gatekeeping is sometimes conducted with little awareness and can be associated with mothers' low self-esteem.
- An intervention program that teaches about the effects of gatekeeping can help make mothers aware of their gatekeeping tendencies and promote positive gatekeeping among mothers (support for father's role) and fathers (support for mother's role).
- Assessing what is happening in a family in regard to gatekeeping and the validity of restrictive or protective parenting supports the development of parenting plans that support father involvement appropriate to an individual family situation.

Overnights for Young Children

Historically, parenting plans for young children (under age 6) have specified that one parent, typically the mother, maintains primary residential status, with the other parent spending less time with the children. Early psychological literature that emanated from assessment and evaluation data of custody disputes between biological and foster or adoptive parents supported the notion that stability in residence and consistency in caretaking are critical elements for young children's healthy adjustment (Goldstein, Solnit, & Freud, 1973; Goldstein, Solnit, Goldstein, & Freud, 1996). The authors described children's foreshortened sense of time and their resulting need for regular contact and few or short separations from adults with whom they were developing secure attachments. Goldstein et al.'s analysis relied on the knowledge of attachment that was available at the time of their research. Much of the theory Goldstein et al.

relied on about the role of secure attachment in children has been borne out over time and research, but recent studies also have expanded what is known about multiple attachments in general, and the role of the father in particular (Lamb & Lewis, 2010; Paquette, 2004).

In brief, separation responses of infants become stronger as attachments to caregivers solidify between 6 and 24 months. There is often a primary caregiver whom the child prefers and seeks comfort from when distressed, although this preference fluctuates at different developmental stages in the first few years of life (see Lamb & Lewis, 2010). Yet the non-preferred caregivers remain important figures, and the preference diminishes and often disappears by the time the child is 18 months of age (Lamb, 2002). Although infants and toddlers may resist transitions between parents (p. 132) in their second year, just as they sometimes protest “even more strongly” (Lamb & Kelly, 2009, p. 190) when transitioning to out-of-home care providers, they generally comfort quickly once the transition has been made. The final phase of attachment formation begins when children are approximately 2 years old (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990), when the cognitive and linguistic abilities of 2- to 3-year-olds enable them to tolerate longer separations with less distress. This is especially likely when both parents have been providing regular care to the baby, including feeding, soothing, putting to bed, and so on, so that attachments to both caregivers are being consolidated and strengthened on an ongoing basis (Lamb & Kelly, 2009). It is now understood that the basis for secure attachments begins and solidifies early in life, but that attachment also changes across childhood, varies across caregivers, and is subject to change in conjunction with early life events, especially adverse ones (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008).

After separation, the problem lies in balancing children’s needs for stability with their needs for regular interaction with both caregivers around important aspects of care, such as sleep routines. When there have been overnights with the less seen or non-residential parent built into the parenting plan, conventional wisdom suggested that fewer overnights, ideally once the child was 3 years old, maximized children’s potential to develop secure attachment to the primary caregiver and maintain their sense of safety and comfort. A current area of disagreement among professionals surrounding parenting plans for young children is whether overnight visits with a secondary caretaker (typically the father) is developmentally facilitative for children under 5 years of age. With increased knowledge of child development as well as the benefits of father involvement, some child development experts question the validity of the historically held belief that overnights with secondary caretakers are disruptive to development. They assert that children are not only capable of adjusting to overnights with both parents but can also benefit from this experience (Kelly & Lamb, 2005). Other experts assert that overnight visits are inadvisable for infants and young toddlers (Solomon & Biringen, 2005).

These scholars agree on some critical points and disagree on others (Pruett, 2005). They agree that:

1. Attachment theory offers an empirically founded lens through which to consider and examine children’s separation responses and relationships to their parents, with different features associated with secure attachment in infancy, toddlerhood, and childhood.
2. Children develop multiple attachments; fathers as well as mothers constitute important attachment figures in children’s lives, and father-child attachments are independent from and distinct in quality from mother-child attachments.

3. Separations are not inherently harmful for children, and the work of early attachment theorists may not be directly germane to divorce situations.

The scholars have different views on three equally important assumptions:

1. The relative import for child attachment and bonding to the non-primary caregiver(s), and the degree to which attachment to a second parent or parent figure compensates for separations from the primary attachment figure;
- (p. 133) 2. The weight to assign to the child's preference for the mother at different ages, especially at approximately 18 months old, when children's preference for the primary attachment figure begins to fluctuate between caretakers;
3. In divorce situations, how to balance the importance of consistency in residence and overall stability of care with support for high levels and quality of father-child relationships. Empirical research does not offer clarity about the relative import of these factors vis-à-vis each other.

These three issues are examined with respect to a body of child development and attachment literature that focused on different research questions. Experts disagree about how to interpret the available literature, which findings are most relevant, and how meaning attributed to the findings gets made. Individual value systems and theoretical preferences are implicated in the debate; developmental theorists, family systems theorists, and psychoanalytically oriented theorists tend to see the same world through different lenses. Compared to the volumes of studies that indirectly address considerations of how children feel and stay connected to important adults in their life, and how children maintain equilibrium when they separate, make transitions, and adapt to stress (e.g., Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), there are only a few studies that directly address the question of how overnights for young children directly impinge on optimal development. Four relevant studies are described, with strengths and limitations of each summarized in Table 5.2. In the absence of more specific data, mental health and legal professionals are left to make individual decisions based on the best clinical evidence that can be gleaned in each family's situation.

Table 5.2 Four Seminal Overnights Studies

	Participants	Procedures	Findings and Analysis	Strengths
Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004	<p>132 families, including 101 divorcing and 31 unmarried parents with children ages 0-6</p> <p>Families predominantly Caucasian, predominantly low to moderate income levels; range of parental conflict levels</p>	<p>After both parents agreed to participate, parents completed a self-report questionnaire at the time of filing for divorce and again 15-18 months later.</p> <p>Widely used self-report measures provided data on parent-child relationships (Negative Changes in Parent-Child Relationship), conflict (Content of Conflict Checklist [CCC]), and demographics. Child problems were measured by CBCL (Achenbach) filled out by both parents separately. Zero- to 1-year-olds were not assessed in this study because the CBCL is not normed for that age group.</p>	<p>Data analytic strategies: bivariate correlations followed by hierarchical regression analysis</p> <p>Poorer parent-child relationships were related to various negative child outcomes. Parent conflict also explained child behavior problems.</p> <p>Overall: Fathers reported that children with overnights, more caretakers, and consistent schedules had fewer social problems. Mothers reported that children with overnights and more caretakers had fewer social problems and attention problems. Both parents reported fewer internalizing problems when consistent schedules were maintained.</p>	<p>Both m and fat asse</p> <p>Stud on m that wide in th Over data repo thir (obj sou Num care and cons are not asse they for i aspe pare plan youn chil beyo pres over</p>

		<p>Parenting plan information was coded by research staff based on court-provided information (for control group) or clinician-provided information (for intervention group). Parenting plan variables included the number of overnights; the number of caretakers, which assessed the number of significant people (parents and others) the child spent significant waking time with; consistent schedules (yes, no) was measured as the same schedule on weekdays (M-F) across weeks.</p>	<p>Mothers also reported that having more caretakers was associated with sleep disturbances and anxiety/depression. Gender differences: Girls benefited from overnights and more caretakers, boys did not. Age differences: Overnights did not benefit or cause distress to the toddlers (2-3) and benefited 4- to 6-yr-olds. After accounting for parent-child relationship changes and parental conflict, the parenting plan variables were still significantly related to cognitive and social outcomes for children, but the differences were not large in absolute terms.</p>
<p>McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, Wells, & Long, 2010</p>			

	<p>From a very large sample that included intact families, 835 separated/divorcing families with children ages 3 months to 5 years were studied.</p> <p>Families were representative of the general Australian population. The children were assessed in three groups: <2 years, 2-3 years, and 4-5 years. They were also divided into groups based on overnight status:</p> <p>Infants (0-1) <i>Rare:</i> less than 1 ovn/yr <i>Primary care:</i> between 1 ovn/mo and 1 ovn/wk <i>Shared:</i> 1+ ovn/wk</p> <p>2- to 6-yr-olds <i>Rare:</i> <1 ovn/yr <i>Primary care:</i> between 1 ovn/mo and 5 ovn/2 wks</p>	<p>Data were collected for the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC); collection techniques included face-to-face interviews, brief observations, and mail-in self-report questionnaires. Primary caregivers filled out surveys for demographic, parenting, parental relationship, and outcome data.</p>	<p>Data analytic strategies: Hierarchical regression analysis using linear or logistic regression depending on the type of outcome variable</p> <p>There were no significant findings relating overnights to psychosomatic outcomes. Children <2 years in shared arrangements had higher irritability than children in primary care. The degree of monitoring proximity to the primary caretaker did not differ across these groups.</p>	<p>Obtaini from LS allowec researc use an develop approp variabl employ sample</p> <p>Use multi grou allow com Data colle from sour Over wer expl with app defin and deta prev stud Find base spec age app outc emo dysn</p>
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Supporting Father Involvement in the Context of Separation and Divorce

	<p><i>Shared: 5+ ovn/2 wks</i></p>	<p>Outcomes pertained to emotional dysregulation and psychosomatic symptoms. Parents rated psychosomatics as wheezing, health status (PEDS), and a Global Health Measure. Emotional dysregulation included parent ratings of proximity monitoring behaviors with the primary caregiver (three items taken from Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales), irritability (Short Temperament Scale for Infants), problems (Brief Infant-Toddler Social-Emotional Assessment [BITSEA]), and emotional development. Caregivers rated conflict with caregiver, and observers rated negative response to parent (yes/no). Some different measures were used for each of the three age groups.</p>	<p>Children age 2-3 in shared arrangements exhibited lower levels of persistence with tasks, as well as more problematic behaviors. There were no significant group differences for sleep difficulties, relations with peers, social adjustment, and emotional symptoms. Conflict with caregiver and observed negative interactions also were not significantly different across groups.</p>	
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			<p>The 4- to 5-year-olds in shared arrangements showed no negative effects in comparison with children in primary care. Variation in behavior and emotional regulation in this group was explained by parental conflict and emotional variability rather than residential arrangements.</p>	
<p>Altenhofen, Sutherland, & Biringen, 2010</p>	<p>24 divorcing mothers and their children, ages 1-6</p> <p>Families predominantly Caucasian</p> <p>Averaged 8 months since separation</p>	<p>Mother and child engaged in free play while parent completed self-report questionnaires. This was designed to simulate parents' normal home environment (multitasking). This process was taped and scored for maternal emotional availability (EA). Lastly, the mother participated in a semi-structured interview related to the parenting plan.</p>	<p>Data Analytic Strategies: bivariate correlations followed by hierarchical regression analysis</p> <p>54% of children showed insecure attachment (no comparison group). Age of onset of overnights was not significantly related to attachment or dependency. Mothers who rated themselves as using higher-conflict tactics had low emotional availability.</p>	<p>Data w obtaine measur commo area of</p> <p>Chil atta an in vari asse stud over</p>

		<p>Widely used qualities such as age at onset of overnight stays, interparental conflict and communication, and EA were examined for their importance in child attachment security and dependency. Attachment security and dependency were assessed using Waters' Attachment Q-Set. EA includes four caregiver scales (Sensitivity, Structuring, Nonintrusiveness, and Nonhostility) and two child scales (Responsiveness to the Caregiver and Involvement of the Caregiver). Shared parenting = avg. 8 overnights/month. No range given and S.D. large (which means great variability within small sample).</p>	<p>No regression equations were significant. That is, when considered in unison, the variables were unrelated to outcome variables</p>	
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<p>Solomon & George, 1999</p>	<p>126 mother-toddler pairs Avg. child age 29 months Married mothers had higher income and higher education, and were less likely to work full-time. 3 overnight groups: overnights (n = 55), no overnights (n = 29), married families (n = 42). Many of the families had changed overnight status within the past year from no overnights to overnights.</p>	<p>Children's attachment status was classified as organized, disorganized, or unclassifiable, based on prior studies. In a Strange Situation procedure paradigm, pairs attended a single session in a laboratory playroom. They were videotaped doing two interactive tasks: a problem-solving task and a cleanup task. Brief separations and reunions (3 and 5 minutes) were arranged between tasks. Measures: Problem-solving task: mother's supportive presence and child's task orientation. Cleanup task: mother's authoritative and child's self-control.</p>	<p>Analytic strategies: ANOVAs and ANCOVAs with attachment status and family group. Married and non-overnight groups were combined. Problem-solving task: Unclassifiable mothers provided more support in overnight than in comparison families. Within the overnight families, organized and unclassifiable mothers provided more support than disorganized mothers. Cleanup task: No significant effects across family groups. Authors questioned if lack of results is due to the task being less developmentally appropriate for toddlers than other task. Tasks were then combined:</p>	<p>Used a known for attachment assessment adapted used m First focus specific over and using attachment mea</p>
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			Post-separation child “breakdowns” (low self-control score but adequate problem-solving score) were significantly more common among the overnight group (54% to 27%). Larger differences were found across attachment groups as well.	
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The first study examined how the occurrence and structure of overnight visits relates to psychological and behavioral problems in 132 young children (Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004). Significant findings included the importance of consistent schedules each week, and a gender difference in which girls benefited from parenting plans that involved overnights and multiple caregivers, while boys did not reap the same benefit. Inconsistent schedules were more difficult for boys than for girls. Outcome indicators included children’s depression/anxiety, sleep problems, aggression, and social withdrawal. In this study, the youngest children (0-2-year-olds) were not assessed, though this fact is not always recognized by professionals citing this study. The 2- to 3-year-olds neither benefited nor developed behavioral symptoms as a result of overnights or multiple caretakers; overnights with 4- to 6-year-olds had benefits.

In path analyses using the same sample of parents (Pruett & Barker, 2009), the maternal model showed that overnights and consistent schedules week to week were related indirectly to child outcomes through their reciprocal relationship to mothers’ support of fathers 15 to 18 months after the divorce. The same variables were significant in the paternal model, except that there was a direct correlation to child outcomes. Less couple conflict and more cooperation were associated with overnights and a consistent schedule, which was in turn associated with both parents’ views of the child as having fewer behavioral problems. These analyses indicate that the overnights and parenting plan variables operate in the larger family context of parental relations that locate them as one of many dynamics influencing how overnights affect child adjustment and development.

A second recent study assessed children in three age groups—0 to 2 years (n = 248 overnights), 2 to 3 years (n = 487 overnights), and 4 to 5 years (n = 1,215 (p. 134) (p.

135) (p. 136) (p. 137) (p. 138) overnights)—with children living primarily with one parent used as comparable control groups (McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, Wells, & Long, 2010). According to data from primary caretakers, usually the mothers, children under age 2 with frequent overnights (averaging four or more nights every two weeks) were more irritable than those in primary care. Also, they more vigilantly monitored visual proximity with the primary parent than did infants with rare overnights (less than once per month or holidays only), but there were no differences from those in primary care, so it is a bit unclear what this distinction signifies. Among 2- to 3-year-olds, children in a shared care arrangement exhibited lower levels of persistence (the ability to play continuously, stay with routine tasks, etc.) and more distressed parent-child interactions than those with rare overnights or living in primary care. The authors note that children at this age still exhibit distress when separated from their primary caregiver, despite their growing cognitive ability to be aware of and comprehend the separations. No group differences were found for emotional symptoms, conflict with the caregiver, response to strangers, or psychosomatic symptoms. Similar to Pruett et al.'s (2004) results, the 4- to 5-year-olds exhibited no negative effects from having frequent overnight visits with a secondary caregiver. By this age children are generally (p. 139) able to separate from their primary caregiver with minimal distress as long as they are given a clear plan about reunion before the separation (Marvin & Britner, 2008). In both McIntosh's and Pruett's studies, assessments of child behaviors relative to separations and reunions were not collected.

A third study about the effects of overnight visits with secondary caretakers examined the maternal-reported attachment security of 24 children ages 12 to 73 months who were currently experiencing overnights (averaging eight nights per month) compared to that of children in non-divorced families (Altenhofen, Sutherland, & Biringen, 2010). Children whose parents divorced showed a higher incidence of insecure attachment to their primary caregiver (54%) versus 30% to 33% found in other studies of non-divorced families; the families had only recently separated (average = 8 months), and the transition was still underway for those families. Age of onset of overnights was not a significant predictor of security; emotionally available mothers had more securely attached children, introducing an external factor that may eclipse the effects of overnights per se.

The final study (Solomon & George, 1999) compared 126 mother-toddler pairs: 40 had overnights in a baseline study conducted 1 year prior, 42 had no overnights (p. 140) but did have paternal involvement 1 year prior, and 44 were married when assessed 1 year prior. The status of many of the families had recently changed: at this time of assessment 55 were families with overnights, 29 had no overnights, and 42 were married (note that many of the no-overnight families had begun overnights within the last year or less). Using procedures in which families were not assessed in their homes but in a laboratory environment, problem-solving skills (supportive presence of mother and task orientation of toddler) and behavior during a clean-up session (authoritativeness of mother and self-control of toddler) were measured. There were no differences between groups; when the no-overnights and marrieds were combined, children in the overnight group were more likely than the comparison children to have meltdowns in the clean-up session.

It is noteworthy that another Solomon study (cited in Solomon, 2005) using a similar methodology is often quoted in custody and access disputes. Since we could not obtain the full-text article of the study despite extensive efforts, a summary of the study is mentioned below but

is not included on Table 5.2. In this study, 145 mothers and infants 12 to 18 months were assessed. Also, 42 intact and 43 separated fathers were assessed. The groups were divided by overnight status into roughly three equal groups: regular overnights (one or two overnights/week or biweekly), no overnights, or dual-parent (intact). Findings indicated that significantly more infants with overnights were classified as disorganized or unclassifiable in attachment compared to infants in intact families. *Neither the pattern of overnights nor the total amount of time away from the mother predicted disorganized attachment.* Instead, insecure attachment in the overnight group was associated with parental conflict and low communication. Maternal insensitivity to the child was also related to disorganized attachment. Overnight time and patterning was not related to father-child attachment security. Low parent communication again was significantly related to the father-child attachment, similar to results for mother-child pairs. Thus, the relationship between parents, not the overnights, explained differences in child attachment.

Table 5.2 indicates similarities and differences among the studies. It is noteworthy that the Pruett et al. study (2004) did not examine attachment, but rather emotional and behavioral problems that emerged once parent-child relationship quality and parental conflict were accounted for in analyses. Only the Pruett et al. (2004) study reported data from both parents. The latter three studies assessed attachment behaviors or proxies of such; McIntosh et al. (2010) and Solomon (2005) reported finding some difficulties experienced by the children studied, while Altenhofen et al. (2010) did not, perhaps due to a number of methodological weaknesses of that study. All four studies showed that the *context in which overnight arrangements occur is critical.* In particular, high conflict between parents and less effective parenting exacerbate the vulnerabilities that children making more frequent transitions face and appear to override any potential benefits children may derive from spending overnights. Parents with high-conflict relationships must actively communicate, respond sensitively to their child's feelings about transitioning, and strive to shield their children from their conflicts if they are to protect their child's sense of security. This can be tricky, if not downright impossible, for some parents to accomplish, and the benefits of overnight access get mitigated through additional opportunities for parents to have conflict with each other. In these cases, parents can try communicating through e-mail or a log passed back and forth (Deutsch, 2010), but this may not be a sufficient degree or type of communication to reassure the children.

(p. 141) In sum, the current research on parenting plans for young children indicates:

- Factors such as low conflict between parents and their emotional availability play a crucial role in the success of overnights.
- While overnights seem clearly beneficial for older preschoolers, the benefits and drawbacks for younger children are less clearly delineated and await further clarification from larger, longitudinal research samples. Studies to date suggest that caution is warranted and that when young children are spending regular overnights in two homes, follow-ups that assess children's ongoing adaptation or distress should be built into parental agreements.

In aggregate, these studies show that overnights either have no connection or a negative one to child outcomes. Infants and toddlers are most vulnerable to the potentially negative effects. However, these effects were modest and do not simultaneously account for benefits that are

derived over time from keeping fathers involved. In the absence of such data, one may speculate that beginning overnights early benefits father-child relationships (Kelly & Lamb, 2005), but that the benefits that accrue directly to children are more likely to manifest later. Cashmore, Parkinson, and Taylor (2008) found that older children and adolescents with frequent overnight visits reported a closer relationship with their father than those with infrequent or no overnight visits. But at what age the overnights must begin to initiate and maintain such relationships is an unsettled question. Therefore, practitioners and families are encouraged to address questions of parenting plans early, accounting for child temperament, parental, familial, and structural (how close do parents live?) factors, making case-by-case decisions with follow-up monitoring and evaluation built in. When infants or toddlers are at issue, follow-ups scheduled with consultants, mediators, or court designates every few months provide responsible oversight. It is also important to bear in mind that the mother's (or primary caretaker's) attitude toward the overnights and the father's sensitive attunement to the child—especially at transition points—are critical components of how well the child will adjust.

Supporting Father Involvement: An Evidence-Based Intervention for Fathers and Co-parents

A review of the research indicates that it is often difficult for divorced or separated parents to establish a collaborative co-parenting relationship. If they can do so, fathers are more likely to stay actively and positively involved with their children. In addition, there are specific aspects of the couple relationship that affect whether fathers stay involved—whether the couple can overcome a tendency toward restrictive gatekeeping by mothers, and whether the couple can work out overnights in a way that keeps the child's needs in focus. But it is not enough just to hope that divorcing parents will find a way to work together for their children. Many couples need help to accomplish this Herculean task. While there are mediators available to help resolve property and custody disputes, there are few resources available for divorcing couples to work on improving their co-parenting relationship. The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) intervention, developed and evaluated by the senior authors of this chapter, draws on a couple-oriented approach to enhance father involvement, (p. 142) primarily but not exclusively in low-income families. This intervention is discussed, along with considerations of how this approach could be readily adapted for separated or divorcing couples (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) Project

Supporting Father Involvement Intervention Program			
Designed and Adapted:	Philip A. Cowan, Ph.D. Carolyn Pape Cowan, Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley	Marsha Kline Pruett, Ph.D., M.S.L. Smith College School for Social Work Rachel Ebling, Ph.D. Smith College Postdoctoral Student	Kyle D. Pruett, M.D. Yale Child Study Center
Curricula:			
<i>Target:</i>	Fathers	Couples/Co-parents	Educational/ Control group for research
<i>Size:</i>	8-12 fathers	5-6 couples	Any
<i>Length:</i>	16 weeks/32 hours	16 weeks/32 hours	3 hours
<i>Structure:</i>	Open-ended check-in Didactic/Instructional	Open-ended check-in Didactic/Instructional	Information on importance of father involvement
	Activities/Experiential applications	Activities/Experiential applications	Video: <i>Show Your Love</i>
	Homework to reinforce learning	Homework to reinforce learning	Question and answer
<i>Focus/ Domains:</i>	Individual	Individual well-being	
	Couple/partners	Couple/co-partners	
	Parenting	Parenting	
	Three-generational/ families of origin	Three-generational/ families of origin	

Supporting Father Involvement in the Context of Separation and Divorce

	Life stress/social support balance	Life stress/social support balance	
<i>Evidence base:</i>	>800 couples assessed to date; 6-, 18-, and 42-month follow-ups Substantive and lasting effects: Individual depression/anxiety, couple satisfaction and communication, parenting stress, violent methods of problem-solving, couple conflict, child hyperactivity and aggression; agency father-friendliness Successful across income levels, ethnicity, mental health levels, conflict levels		

For more information: www.supportingfatherinvolvement.org

SFI is the first research-based program in the United States designed to encourage fathers from diverse backgrounds to be positively involved with their children, and to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the program with a randomized clinical trial research design (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). The SFI intervention study was designed to help mothers and fathers develop skills and resources to have healthier family relationships, decrease stress, and reduce abusive and/or neglectful behavior. The program aims to improve functioning in multiple aspects of family life (helping the parents increase their satisfaction and well-being as individuals and as a couple, develop healthy relationships with their children, become aware of and improve three-generational patterns of childrearing, and learn to access support from persons and institutions) based on previous literature suggesting that father engagement is associated with all of these areas (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2006).

Since the inception of this study, over 700 families have participated in a series of research phases. Participants have been recruited at family resource centers in five California counties. Criteria for involvement included (a) both parents agreed to participate, (b) the couple had a child 0 to 7 years of age, later increased to 11 years, (c) parents reported no mental health or substance abuse issues that impaired their daily functioning to a degree that they could not participate, and (d) domestic violence was not reported in the family in the past 12 months, and neither partner was afraid to be in the intervention with the other. The intervention phase that is currently under way was recently expanded to include families who are involved in the child welfare system for abuse or violence issues, but again, partners are carefully assessed and deemed not to be at present risk for hurting each other or their child.

For the first wave of published data (Cowan et al., 2009), 289 families completed pre- and post-tests. Of these, 67% were Mexican American and 33% were Caucasian (an African American sample joined in a subsequent phase). Most of the parents were married (75%), and most of the rest were cohabiting (20%).

Couples who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to one of three interventions: a 16-week (32-hour) group for fathers, a 16-week (32-hour) group for couples, or a low-dose comparison condition with the couple attending a single 3-hour group information session where they learn about the importance of fathers' family involvement to the children and the parents. The group interventions are psychoeducational and therapeutically oriented and were co-led by

trained clinicians, although they are not therapy groups. All families were also assigned a case manager to help them access other needed services. The case managers stayed in close contact with the families and helped them maximize attendance in the intervention groups and access other services as needed. Findings to date indicate that for partners who are willing and able to attempt co-parenting together, the curriculum is leading to benefits for the parents as individuals, as couples, and as parents, and shows positive effects on the children's acting out and withdrawn, depressed behaviors. Parents report that the program is enjoyable, helpful, and highly relevant to their everyday situations.

The group curricula for fathers and couples groups cover identical topic areas and have similar activities and exercises but are either geared primarily towards (p. 143) self-discovery and skill development or focused on dyadic application, depending upon which group the parents are offered in a random process. Couples were recruited from their communities broadly, and many of them were in conflict. Few of them had been involved in legal conflicts at the time of group enrollment, although the staff members at several of the sites are considering offering the intervention to couples with higher conflict or who are divorcing.

A number of significant and encouraging outcomes have emerged from the SFI study thus far. To name a few, at an 18-month follow-up, parents from both the fathers and couples groups reported decreased levels of depression/anxiety, parenting stress, and violent problem-solving. This stands in contrast to parents in the control condition, in which all of these indicators worsened over the same period. In addition, children of parents in the intervention groups were found to have stable levels of behavior problems, in contrast with consistent increases in problem behaviors in children of parents from the control condition. Participants in the couples groups also maintained their relationship satisfaction while the control groups' satisfaction declined, in line with normative trends found in longitudinal studies of the transition to parenthood (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). The couples group participants also showed reduced parenting stress, while fathers group and comparison participants showed no change. Finally, interviews with staff of the SFI project, family resource centers that hosted the study, and counties in which they were located, along with more widely collected agency self-assessment questionnaires, indicated that the family centers were becoming more father-friendly following the study. They reached out to fathers and adapted their policies, procedures, programs, and practices to be more welcoming and inclusive of fathers. This finding has far-reaching systemic effects so that clinical intervention is not the only place and method for increasing fathers' family involvement. When agencies—especially female-dominated ones—also nurture and sustain such efforts, the likelihood of change toward positive father involvement is increased, and resources for ongoing support are built into the agency offering the program.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the SFI project is its ongoing adaptability to diverse populations. So far SFI is effective with both English and Spanish speakers, immigrants and non-immigrants, parents with high and low socioeconomic status, parents with initially high and low conflict levels and satisfaction as couples, and parents entering with high and low levels of depression. Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American families have participated. The intervention program is currently being replicated and adapted through not-for-profit agencies in four locations in Alberta, Canada as well as in Great Britain, New Zealand, and with teen parents in Hartford, CT.

What has been demonstrated through SFI so far:

- Low-income families facing a myriad of problems in their personal and social environments can be recruited and retained in ongoing group interventions with clinically trained leaders. They not only attend on average 75% of the sessions but have consistently asked for more group time. This attendance factor is likely a large contributor to the intervention's success, as attendance is high relative to federally funded fatherhood and co-parenting interventions that have met with less success (Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2010).

(p. 144) • SFI success rests on targeting multiple aspects of family life (individual, parenting, co-parenting, three-generation transmission of behaviors, and how to balance life stress with social support). Addressing the full family environment helps ensure that family changes, such as increased father involvement, endure subsequent to the intervention.

- Positive change was sustained in individuals' levels of well-being (anxiety and depression), their satisfaction with their couple or co-parenting relationships, parenting stress, and violent means of problem-solving. Their children's behavioral adjustment remained steady, whereas problem behaviors of control group children worsened over the same period.

- This intervention can be effective for many types of families and also supports positive change toward father inclusion in the agencies that serve families and the communities in which they live.

The existence of both fathers-only and co-parenting/couples groups within one model that strengthens co-parenting makes this intervention particularly relevant and applicable for separating or divorcing families. In divorce interventions, it is generally assumed that parents must be separated in order to be effective. Support groups exist, but intervention groups are typically reserved for children. Groups offer natural supports that can help parents garner their internal and familial resources to better sustain their children through the transition. And co-parenting is best developed *in vivo* rather than through separate intervention groups. Though being together in a group will not be effective or desirable for all couples, when it is safe and practical to do so, the relief that both married and unmarried or divorced parents experience from acting together on their children's behalf can be immediate. Such collaboration reduces the likelihood of polarizing through the legal process. Moreover, SFI addresses the critical issues of cooperation, conflict reduction, and maternal (or paternal) gatekeeping, which have been identified through research as salient issues among divorcing families. The SFI curriculum could readily be adapted to include content on parenting plans generally, and overnights specifically. It would serve as a preventive intervention that could not only shore up the family to assume healthier relationships in the future but also minimize some of the most deleterious aspects of divorce.

Summary

The current research on father involvement is an important area of study that is expanding the knowledge base of family functioning after divorce. The preponderance of scientifically informed evidence has shown that fathers play an important role in their children's development in married and unmarried families, and recent research has shed light upon the nuances regarding *which* fathers, for *which* children, and under *what circumstances*. As developmental and family researchers continue to explore co-parenting models and their limitations, paternal involvement

with young children, and the family processes such as maternal gatekeeping and overnight stays with fathers that promote or inhibit father involvement, new issues will emerge for study. As the science expands, it will be essential for professionals working with (p. 145) (p. 146) families within and just outside of the legal system to stay informed about how best to support these families.

Guidelines: Considerations and Cautions

- **Moving the Paternal Role Towards Center.** The role of the father in family life has shifted from one of more peripheral parent to a position closer to the center of family life. Coupled with this shift, researchers have sought and identified numerous contributions that fathers make to the development of healthy children. Those contributions include parenting in ways that are, on average, different from maternal parenting styles such that father involvement plays an active role in promoting children's self-sufficiency, problem-solving, frustration tolerance, and cognitive competence and achievement. Moreover, involved fathers play an important role in fostering control behaviors in children, thereby serving a protective function for children's positive adaptation in environmentally vulnerable or socially risky situations. In family law situations, this research adds up to a vote of confidence for including fathers and other significant male figures whenever it is feasible and safe to do so for all family members. It forms an imperative to help families identify and construct parenting plans that secure paternal involvement in children's lives.

- **Involving Fathers as Non-residential Parents.** Involving fathers as non-residential parents may pose significant obstacles. Although co-parenting is now a norm in intact families (though not approaching equal time by both parents), it often leads to complications in post-divorce parenting plans. Helping parents to stay focused on their ongoing team functions may be easier to accomplish if they understand the variety of co-parenting aspects in which they might involve themselves. Theories of co-parenting have progressed to a point where legal professionals can make themselves and families aware of the many aspects of and opportunities for successful co-parenting.

- **The Paternal Role with Young Children is Vulnerable.** Father involvement is especially vulnerable in divorcing families with young children, where fathers may leave the child's residence before they can establish a firm footing in their relationship with their children. Maternal gatekeeping varies from openly supportive to appropriately protective to restrictive behaviors that constrain fathers' involvement with their children. Interventions indicate that raising awareness of mothers' power in this regard helps them identify situations in which they could facilitate rather than hinder fathers' time with their children. Facilitating positive gatekeeping includes each parent's acknowledgement of the other's importance in the family triangle, and fostering behaviors that result in greater cooperation, reduced conflict, and greater father involvement.

• **Overnights for Young Children.** Recent research suggests that frequent overnights for very young children may be associated with attachment difficulties and emotional regulatory problems, though the research is far (p. 147) from conclusive. Studies to date concur that schedule consistency and parents' emotional availability and sensitivity around transition times can facilitate children's adjustment. In the face of parental conflict, infant/child distress, and poor parental communication, overnights with infants and toddlers should be considered cautiously. The kinds of distress focused on in current studies have not produced robust results, nor are they sufficiently longitudinal to assert whether these effects are temporary and balanced by the support overnights lend to father involvement, or whether the effects will translate into longer-term difficulties for the child. Parental and parent-child relationships continue to emerge as unassailable factors within and across studies, and so far the particulars of parenting plans provide less useful information than the child's response to each parent and across contexts. In other words, whether the child is coping well in various contexts (home, child care) matters a great deal for the determination of whether current parenting plans should be sustained.

• **Father-Supportive Interventions.** In the absence of more specific data, interventions that strengthen family relationships with respect to and beyond the divorce—parent-child and co-parent relationships—offer promising solutions to the conundrums faced by families trying to plan for parenting schedules. The Supporting Father Involvement program is offered as an example of a program that could provide a cost-effective alternative to family evaluations and a more comprehensive support than family mediation does at present. It is conceivable that with minor adaptations to the curriculum, parenting plans could be developed by partners in the co-parenting intervention and jointly considered by the leaders and other members of the group.

• **How Professionals Can Support Fathers.** Educating ourselves about the role of fathers, how to engage fathers and enhance their relationships within the divorcing family, and understanding and managing our own biases and expectations about gender roles will go a long way to increasing public perception that there is a level playing field for fathers and mothers who are separating and involved in the family court system.

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