DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 787 PS 015 337

AUTHOR Copeland, Anne P.
TITLE Some Parameters of Risk Following Parental Divorce.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April 25-28, 1985). The document contains broken type.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); Age Differences; *Divorce; *Family Characteristics; Family Problems; Health; *Individual Characteristics; Job Satisfaction; Longitudinal Studies; *Mothers; Sex Differences; Stress Variables; Well Being; *Young Children

ABSTRACT

Discussed are family and child characteristics related to mild adjustment problems following separation and divorce. Data were obtained in a longitudinal study of 120 families with children 6 through 12 years of age. While children in the sample were not very disturbed, data indicate that the "well-being" of children and mothers was better after the first post-separation year. Analysis of mother-child interaction corroborated the finding of improvement after the passage of a year. Children with problems at Year 1 tended to have problems at Year 2. At Year 1, mothers with healthier scores on the Positive Affect and Health measures rated their children as being more psychologically adjusted than did mothers with less healthy scores. Data from mothers, children, and teacher agreed that mothers who still had problems in Year 2 had children who were similarly affected. Mothers who were more satisfied with their work reported more positive adjustment than did less satisfied mothers, and mothers in higher level jobs had children with fewer physical health symptoms. Interparent conflict affected children negatively when the divorce had not been heard in court by the time of the second year assessment. Children's age and gender were found to be related to the types of relationships children had with their mothers, suggesting that children's age and gender may draw out different interactions with their mothers and that these interactions may differentially affect adjustment directly. (RH)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy

ED261787

# Some Parameters of Risk Following Parental Divorce

Anne P. Copeland
Boston University

Society for Research in Child Development 1985

I will be reporting today on data from Boston University's Family Changes Project, a longitudinal study of 6-12-year-old children whose parents had recently separated. I will be representing work of my own as well as that of a number of colleagues, in particular my collaborator Abigail Stewart. Families have participated in the project at two separate times so far — once within eight months of the physical separation, then again one year later. Families were identified through examination of court records in all counties including and surrounding Boston, Massachusetts. Though a number of custodial and non-custodial fathers and non-custodial mothers did participate in the project, in the great majority of families the "target" children lived with their mothers; 120 of these families make up the sample that I will be discussing today. Target children were always 6 to 12 years old; where more than one 6-12-year-old was in a family, one was arbitrarily chosen to be the focus of a number of interview and questionnaire items.

All family members were invited to participate in the project. Both years, mothers and children were individually interviewed about aspects of their daily lives, both currently and prior to the separation, then about the reasons for and family reactions to the divorce. Mothers completed a number of standard psychological tests before coming to the project, children were orally administered a similar variety of measures during the interview, and about half the sample was videotaped during a dyadic play session. I will enumerate these measures as I report on the results. These data, then, form the basis for my discussion today of the family and child characteristics that are related to various levels of adjustment to parental divorce.

The first point that I would like to make, as background for the rest of the results, is that the children in our sample were not very disturbed. We certainly have a range of adjustment — that will be the basis for my remarks. But we took great pains to gather a nonclinically-recruited sample, and we think we have succeeded. We felt that much of the divorce literature, because of the sampling procedures used in many of the research studies, is dependent on information from children who are troubled and thus is not reflective of the full range of possible reactions to parental separation. Thus, the topic of this paper will be family and child characteristics related to <u>mild</u> adjustment problems following this particular family stress.

Second, though the children were not clinically-referred to our project, we certainly <u>did</u> see improvement over time, from the immediate post-separation period to the assessment one year later. In Table 1, change in several aggregate measures of adjustment for the mother, as self-reported, and for the children, as reported by themselves and by their mothers, are reported. The conceptually-grouped measures in each aggregate score are consistently inter-correlated. The children's "well-being" measure is an aggregate of children's self-esteem score on Harter's Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982), their report of psychological symptoms on a child-adapted version of Gurin's Symptom Checklist (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981), and their reports of affective reactions to their parents' separation. Children reported significantly improved ratings of their "well-being" at Year 2 as compared to Year 1.

PS 015537

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Anne P. Copeland
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FILMED FROM BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 1
Change in Adjustment from Year 1 to Year 2

| | Significant Improvement | Trend | No Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Child Self-report | Well-being | Health | |
| Mother-report | Psychological adjustment | | Health |
| Mother Self-report | Negative affect<br>Health | | Well-being |

A trend toward improvement was also found on their self-reported health status, a measure derived from the physical symptoms reported on Gurin's Symptom Checklist. Mothers reported a significant improvement in their children's "psychological adjustment," an aggregate of their ratings on Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978), across the subscales -- which, in our sample, were very highly intercorrelated. Mothers, in contrast to their children, however, reported no difference in their children's health on a questionnaire which tapped the frequency of a number of common childhood disorders or on the Somatic subscale score for the Child Behavior Checklist. Finally, mothers, when describing their own adjustment, reported significantly more "positive affect," a reverse-coded aggregate of the four negative subscales from the Profile of Mood States (POMS) (McNair, Lorr, & Droppelman, 1971) and better health, on a questionnaire similar to that completed for their children and on Gurin's Symptom Checklist, at Year 2 than at Year 1. Their "well-being," an aggregate of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), the POMS vigor-activity subscale, and a global rating of life satisfaction from the Gurin, did not show significant change across time. Thus, in what the participants told us about their own and their children's adjustment, things were generally better after a year had passed.

Another source of information confirms these self-report data, and strengthens our contention that much change occurs even in the very first post-separation year. A subsample of 62 mother-child dyads was videotaped during a half-hour play session; 49 of these pairs returned for the Year 2 videotape session. Videotapes were coded using the Response-Class Matrix (Nash, Terdal, & Anderson, 1973); every 15 seconds, one coder records the mother's most recent behavior and how the child responded, and another coder records the child's most recent behavior and how the mother responded. Most category names are self-explanatory, but one may not be -- the category of "interaction" was used when a dyad member played with the other, with or without talking. If talking occurred, the content was neutral and non-directive. In other analyses, this "interaction" category has been found to be the most consistently related to good quality of relationship and better adjustment.

Significant changes were indeed found between Year 1 and Year 2 videotapes, but it was not clear, just by looking at this finding, whether change was due to

increases in age or to the change in the post-separation stress. Accordingly, a cross-sectional/ ...ort-term longitudinal analysis was performed. Year 1 videotapes involving 7-year-olds, for example, were compared with Year 2 videotapes involving 7-year-olds (i.e., who had been 6 at Year 1); similar analyses with the other age comparisons were performed. The results differed depending on the age of the child but generally led us to believe that changes across years were indeed due to decreases in family stress rather than to developmental changes. At Year 2, children of various ages interacted with their mothers more, ignored them less, and/or were more compliant with their mothers' commands. The mothers, in turn, were more responsive to these interaction attempts than they had been at Year 1. Thus, it seems from the mothers' and the children's accounts and from our own observations, that things were going more smoothly after the passage of a year.

The final background piece is that, in general, those children who did have problems at Year 1 tended to be the same children who, even in a reduced sense, had problems at Year 2. Correlations between scores on the various aggregate measures at the two assessments are presented in Table 2. All correlations were significant at the .001 level.

Table 2
Year 1 - Year 2 Correlations of Child and Mother Measures

| | |
|---|---|
| Child | |
| Self-report | |
| Well being | .573*** |
| Health | .381*** |
| Mother-report | |
| Health | .360*** |
| Psychological adjustment | .830*** |
| Mother | |
| Self-report | |
| Positive affect | .378*** |
| Well-being | .399*** |
| Health | .654*** |

The question posed by all the papers in this symposium is "what are the family and child characteristics that may predict psychological disorder." Against the background of these data, we are currently asking these same questions; first: "what family and dyadic variables are related to children's adjustment following parental separation and divorce?" The strictly-defined family-level predictors -- that is, those in which a single score describes the entire family as a unit -- are just now being coded, so I can only describe them at this point. We are able to characterize our 120 families by the degree to which they satisfy what we think are six primary functions of families (the provision of protection, nurturance, companionship, regularity, material resources, and a sense of cohesion) and by their inclusion of any of several family-systems/ clinical variables such as executive subsystem role boundary issues, triadic tension, conflict, and enmeshment. We think we have been successful in coding these family-level variables from our individually-obtained interviews, but analysis of their validity and their meaning for children's adjustment has not been completed.

The data that are available now involve the mothers and fathers of the children. The first question we asked is whether children's adjustment in this period is tied to that of their mothers. Findings are reported in Table 3, for both Year 1 and Year 2. Mothers' assessments of their children are clearly related to their own self-ratings; one interpretation is that the two are, indeed, linked, though the causal direction, if any, is not at all clear. It could be that we are seeing only an artifact of mothers' global assessments of her and everyone around her. It is interesting, in this light, to note that, at least by Year 2, the children's own self-reports and those of their teachers (from Achenbach's Teacher form) also indicate that upset mothers have upset children. At Year 1, then, mothers with healthier scores on the Positive Affect and Health measures rated their children as being more psychologically adjusted. By Year 2, everyone — the mothers themselves, the children, and the teachers -- agreed even more strongly that where the mothers were still having problems, so were their children. We value this perspective of the teachers particularly strongly as they provide a source of information that is outside the family but that is based on a long-standing familiarity with the children.

Table 3
Correlations between Mothers' and Children's Adjustment

| | Year 1 Self-rated Mother Adjustment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Child Adjustment | Positive Affect | Well-Being | Health |
| Self-rated | | | |
| Well-being | .05 | .03 | .09 |
| Health | -.02 | .01 | -.01 |
| Mother-rated | | | |
| Health | .12 | .11 | .13 |
| Psychological adjustment | .26** | .04 | .25** |
| Teacher-rated | | | |
| Internalizing | -.03 | .13 | -.13 |
| Externalizing | -.10 | .05 | -.22 |
| | Year 2 | | |
| Self-rated | | | |
| Well-being | .01 | .15 | .34*** |
| Health | -.10 | .13 | .21* |
| Mother-rated | | | |
| Health | .24* | .26* | .26** |
| Psychological adjustment | .04 | .09 | .25* |
| Teacher-rated | | | |
| Internalizing | -.25* | -.34** | -.22 |
| Externalizing | -.13 | -.22 | -.31* |

Two other questions that are germane to the issue of family predictors of children's stress have been addressed by two groups of students working in our project. Barenbaum, Franz, Malley, and Orvoll (1985) examined the role of our mothers' work situations — that is, the amount of time they spent at work, the level of their jobs, and their work satisfaction — on their own and their children's adjustment. At both assessments, neither the level of mothers' jobs nor the amount of time they spent there bore a significant relationship to their own adjustment, but their satisfaction and attitudes towards their jobs did, especially at Year 1 — as expected, mothers who were more satisfied with their work reported more positive adjustment. One might guess that positive work experiences for mothers might lead, indirectly, to better adjustment for the children. While at Year 1 no such relationship was found, at Year 2, a consistent and significant, though relatively low level, correlation was found between children's health — reported by mothers or the children themselves — and mothers' work. That is, mothers in higher level jobs, who spent more time at work and enjoyed it more, had children with fewer physical health symptoms.

The second question, examined by Bursik and Barenbaum (1985), concerned the degree of interparent acrimony following the separation and its effect on children's adjustment. Acrimony was measured here in various ways, including mothers' and children's reports, and by the number of legal motions filed, including custody, visitation, support, restraining, or vacating motions. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that when there was evidence that the parents had continuing conflict and that they had not been able to resolve the separation — that is, that by our second year's assessment the divorce had not been heard in court — this interparent conflict affected children negatively. In the families where the divorce had been heard in court, on the other hand, no significant relationships were found between level of conflict and children's adjustment.

These, then, are several family characteristics that we find to be correlated with children's adjustment even in this non-referred sample — mothers' own adjustment, mothers' employment status and satisfaction, and interparent acrimony. Examining the child characteristics that are related to adjustment poses an interesting problem of deciding which are predictor and which are outcome variables, since we have no pre-separation data. Is self-esteem at Year 1, for example, legitimately to be considered a predictor of behavior problems at either year? We think not, and instead have focused on several demographic characteristics, specifically age and gender, and would like to present data on how the course of the first post-separation year differs for different age-gender groups of children.

Three-way analyses of variance involving age (6-8 vs. 9-12 year olds), gender, and length of separation (where the children were split at the median length of time since the father left the home) were performed on the various child adjustment measures described earlier for Year 1. Results are summarized in Table 4. Significant main effects for length of separation for mother-rated physical health and child-rated well-being and a trend toward one for teacher's total Achenbach rating reiterated the Year 1-Year 2 differences reported earlier — improvement was found over time. The only significant main effect for gender was in mother-rated health where girls were rated as less healthy. Teachers tended to see boys as having more problems. Two interactions involving length of separation and age were found, one for the mother-rated psychological adjustment variable, which was modified by the third factor, gender, and a trend toward one for the teacher Achenbach

Table 4
Results from Age X Gender X Length of Separation Analyses

Significant Main Effects

| Length of Separation | Gender |
|---|---|
| Health (mother) | Health (mother) |
| Well-being (child) | (Behavior (teacher)) |
| (Behavior (teacher)) | |

Significant Interactions

| Length of Separation X Age | Length of Separation X Age X Gender |
|---|---|
| (Behavior (teacher)) | Psychological Adjustment (mother) |

rating. In both cases, the younger children, especially the boys, separated a shorter time were seen as having more problems. This finding suggested to us that we examine our play interactions with this length of separation variable in mind, to see if age or gender seemed to related to maternal relationships.

Findings were very consistent in demonstrating that the involvement and positiveness of mother-younger-child dyads was higher at the end than the beginning of the year and that the reverse was true for mother-older-child dyads, especially those involving older boys. The significant age X length-of-separation interactions are depicted in Figure 1. In particular, when their parents had been separated a longer time, the older children were significantly less interactive and the younger children more interactive than when the separation had more recently occurred. Corollary information is found in the "nonresponsiveness" category of play — older children in the longer-separation group were significantly more nonresponsive than the other three groups. Older children, especially boys, were significantly less positive in response to their mothers' interactions than the other groups. And recently-separated mothers of the younger children were less positive than the other groups in response to their children's interactions. It was the younger children in the recently-separated group who were particularly noncompliant with their mothers' commands. The final figure reiterates this theme — the mothers of these older children were also less interactive at the end than the beginning of the year, while mothers of younger children appeared to be more so. The theme is that the younger children had less positive or engaged relationships with their mothers immediately following the separation but that their relationships generally seemed to improve by the second half of the year. Conversely, older children, especially the boys, had more synchronous and positive interactions with their mothers at the beginning than at the end of the year. Remember that these are cross-sectional data, though, and generalizations about true change with time are speculatory. Data extending these trends into the second year of the post-separation period have not yet been analyzed but will provide an interesting, longer look at the course of adjustment. The characteristics of age and gender, then, clearly are related to the types of relationships these children have with their mothers.

Rather than, or at least in addition to, these variables being purely individual-level ones, they should be considered as contributory to family or dyadic relationships which in turn could be expected to influence adjustment The focus in the divorce literature has generally been on how age or gender per se directly affect

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

children's adjustment -- older children, for example, are thought to be able to use higher-level cognitive strategies for understanding their parents' relationships, and they probably use different coping or defensive styles to deal with the stress. Similarly, children's gender may directly color their experience of a divorce -- boys' and girls' needs for limits or their vulnerability may be quite different, with different consequences for dealing with the experience. In addition to these direct effects, though, it seems that children's age and gender may draw out different interactions with their mothers and that these interactions may differentially affect adjustment directly. Older children's having more new responsibilities, younger children having less access to facts about the divorce because of a desire to protect them, boys being in a confusing replacement situation for their fathers, or girls receiving ambivalent messages about how women should respond to men -- all these are examples of inherently individual, or child, characteristics of age and gender that function to affect adjustment not directly, but rather through their impact on family relationships. In this context, the boundaries between the child, dyadic, and family-level variables become quite blurred, something that we, in the company of the latest issue of Child Development, see as quite a positive condition.

References

Achenbach, T. (1978). The child behavior profile: I. Boys aged 6-11. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 46, 478-483.

Achenbach, T., & Edelbrock, C. S. (1978). The child behavior profile: II. Boys aged 12-16 and girls aged 6-11 and 12-16. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 47, 223-233.

Barenbaum, N. B., Frans, C. E., Malley, J. E., & Orwoll, L. (1985). Relationships between mothers' and children's post-separation adjustment: The role of mother employment. Presented at Eastern Psychological Association, Boston, MA.

Bursik, K. & Barenbaum, N. B. (1985) Relationships between continuing interparent acrimony and children's post-separation adjustment. Presented at Eastern Psychological Association, Boston, MA.

Gurin, G., Veroff, J., & Feld, S. (1960). Americans view their mental health. New York: Basic Books.

Harter, S. (1982). The perceived competence scale for children. Child Development, 53, 87-97.

Nash, E., Terdal, L., & Anderson, K. (1973). The response-class matrix: A procedure for recording parent-child interaction. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 40, 163-184.

McNair, D., Lorr, M., & Droppleman, L. (1971). Profile of mood states. San Diego, CA; Educational and Industrial Testing Service.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the adolescent self-image. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.

Veroff, J., Kulka, R. A., & Douvan, E. (1981). Mental health in American. New York: Basic Books.