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# Demeaning, Demoralizing, and Disenfranchising Divorced Dads: A Review of the Literature

Linda Nielsen

**ABSTRACT.** The most recent research demonstrates that too many fathers are demeaned, demoralized and disenfranchised after divorce in ways that make it difficult for them to maintain close relationships with their own children. Divorced fathers' relationships are often influenced by: our misconceptions about divorced men, our idealized beliefs about motherhood, our erroneous beliefs about fatherhood, our divorce and custody laws, the mother's attitudes towards the father, each parent's style of relating to the children, the child's gender, and the accuracy of children's memories. The ways in which the mother influences the father's relationship with the children after divorce are also discussed. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com) <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

**KEYWORDS.** Divorced fathers, father-child relationships, remarried fathers

In our country today only 50% of children under the age of 18 live in the same home with their biological father. Roughly 15% live with their mother who has never been married; 15% with their divorced mother who has not yet remarried, and 18% with their mother and stepfather. Only 2% live with their father and stepmother. By the year 2000 it is estimated that only 25% of white children and 10% of black children will live in a home with their father until the age of 18, while

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40% will end up living with their mother and stepfather. Put differently, within the next few years the majority of fathers will not be living in the same home with their children—and even now, the majority of fathers and teenaged children are not living together (Cherlin, 1992; Furstenberg, 1994).

Sadly, most fathers see very little of their children after divorce. Only 8% of divorced fathers get to live with their children for as much as a third of a year. For example, only half of the 2200 children in a survey from the late 1980s had seen their father in the past year and only 15% had seen him once a week (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). On a happier note, compared to 20 years ago, almost twice as many divorced fathers now legally arrange for their children to live with them part-time (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Guttman, 1993). Still, when parents divorce, most fathers end up “childless” and their children end up “fatherless” in many ways (Blankenhorn, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Depner & Bray, 1993; Friedman, 1994; Hoffman, 1995; Warshak, 1992).

Although researchers and the general public have been quite focused on those fathers and mothers who never get married and on divorced mothers, much less attention has been given to divorced fathers (Bender & Brannon, 1994; Blankenhorn, 1994; Cohen, 1995; Depner & Bray, 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson, 1993; Lamb, 1997; Mandell, 1995; Pruett, 1992; Warshak, 1992). Even school counselors and therapists working with children usually exclude and ignore the divorced father, acting as if the children only have one parent—their mother (Blau, 1994; Butler, 1995; Caplan, 1990; Feldman, 1990; Friedman, 1994; Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser, 1991; Phares, 1997; Tillitski, 1992). The good news is that some younger, recently graduated therapists with non-sexist views about men’s and women’s roles are making an effort to include fathers in their children’s therapy (Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser, 1991). Nevertheless, as one of the leading experts puts it: “It is time that clinical researchers and clinical therapists stop serving as gatekeepers who prevent the father’s involvement in research and therapy” (Phares, 1997, p. 283).

In an effort to demonstrate the ways in which many of us unintentionally disenfranchise, demean, and demoralize divorced fathers, let us examine: (1) Some common misconceptions about divorced fathers (2) Reasons why divorced fathers do not have closer relationships with their children (3) Ways in which divorced mothers influence the

father-child relationship and (4) Characteristics of mothers who are the most supportive of fathers after their divorce.

## ***MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT DIVORCED FATHERS***

### ***Financial Support: Deadbeat Dads***

Contrary to the popular image of “deadbeat dads,” 75% of divorced fathers are fully meeting their financial obligations to their children. Four million fathers are paying 12 billion dollars a year in child support. Moreover, those divorced men with the highest incomes are usually paying for most, if not all, of their children’s expenses—especially when the mother did not work full-time outside the home throughout their marriage (Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman, 1993; Farrell, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Sheehy, 1998). And when the mother grants the father some voice in how his child support money is being spent, the father rarely fails to pay and often pays more than is legally required of him (Arditti, 1992; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Blau, 1994; Dudley, 1991; Kelley, 1995; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Mandell, 1995; Parke, 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist, 1994; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994; Teachman, 1991).

The one million “deadbeat dads” who create such a negative image of divorced fathers are usually the most poorly educated men with very low or no incomes and men who never married the mother of their children (Arditti, 1992; Pettys, 1993). This isn’t to say that because a man is poor or because he never married he should be allowed to abandon his children financially. We might, however, wonder why poor fathers are legally required to pay child support whereas poor mothers are not required to pay anything when the children are living full-time with the father (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). It’s also worth noting that some fathers who refuse to send any more money to their ex-wife for child support have their children living with them more than a third of the year, and have an ex-wife who lives with the man she committed adultery with while married (Mandell, 1995). In any case, official government statistics underestimate how much money most fathers actually provide because only court-ordered child support is documented and because the money that fathers give voluntarily for

such things as college is not recorded at all (Arditti, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Teachman, 1991). Moreover, a father is often required to pay much more in child support than he would have been spending on the children if he was still married (Bender & Brannon, 1994).

Another potentially damaging misconception is that divorced fathers are enjoying a much higher standard of living than the children and divorced mother. But in reality most mothers lose about 20%-25% of the income they had access to before their divorce, while most fathers lose 10%-20% (Stroup & Pollock, 1994). Also 80% of women remarry within a few years and regain a standard of living at least equal to what they had before their divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994). In contrast, most divorced men who remarry cannot provide their new family with as high a standard of living as they gave their former wife and children (Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman, 1993; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Yet despite these realities, too many children are still operating under the assumption that after their parents' divorce their father "got everything" while they and their mother "got nothing" (Beer, 1992; Blau, 1994; Einstein, 1994; Frieman, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Jones & Schiller, 1992).

### ***Men, Women and Adultery***

Still another way in which divorced fathers can be demoralized and demeaned is through our misconceptions about divorce itself—misconceptions which must surely have a negative impact on many children's views of their fathers. For example, do you believe that men are more likely than women to leave their marriage because they have fallen in love with someone else? And do you believe that men are generally the ones who initiate divorce? If so, you're wrong. In reality, 75% of all divorces are initiated by the wife. And though in many cases the wife initiates the divorce for such reasons as the husband's alcoholism or physical abuse, in many cases the wife wants the divorce because she has fallen in love with someone else or because she does not feel emotionally fulfilled enough in the marriage. Indeed, women are now almost as likely as men to commit adultery and are *more likely* than men to get divorced because they have fallen in love with someone else. Some women also leave their husbands for a man with whom they have had little, if any, actual sex. So while claiming that they did

not technically “commit adultery,” these wives have nonetheless betrayed and been unfaithful to their husbands (Adler, 1996; Pittman, 1990). As one such divorced father explains: “She would tell me about her boyfriend to impress on me that she didn’t love me. I just couldn’t take it anymore, so I finally had to move out” (Vaughan, 1990, p. 175). In any event, the point is that less often than his children or the general public might assume, the divorced father is often not the person who was unfaithful or who caused the divorce due to such serious problems as alcoholism or abuse (Adler, 1996; Berman, 1992; Braver, Whitley, & Ng, 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson, 1993; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Gottman, 1994; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Pittman, 1990; Reibstein & Richards, 1993; Ripps, 1994; Vaughan, 1990).

### ***The Emotional Impact of the Divorce***

A number of us—including the millions of children whose parents are divorced—also do not seem to understand that fathers suffer as much or more emotionally as mothers after a divorce. Indeed, it seems as if people more readily envision the divorced father as a carefree “swinging bachelor” rather than as a depressed, lonely, disoriented human being. Many children, therefore, might be surprised to learn that men are *more likely* than women to become depressed, commit suicide, or develop a stress-related illness after their divorce. Most divorced fathers are extremely lonely, overwrought, and disoriented—mainly because they have lost daily contact with their children. Unlike mothers, almost all fathers are essentially rendered childless as soon as their marriage ends. In part because men are so reluctant to let people know how miserably unhappy and depressed they are or to ask for help, many people—including their own children—do not appreciate the extent to which most men suffer after a divorce (Beer, 1992; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Buehler & Ryan, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson, 1993; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Kruk, 1991; Pledge, 1992; Pruett, 1992; Warshak, 1992).

### ***The Benefits of Fathers versus Mothers***

The belief that children benefit far less from a relationship with their father than with their mother can also be demoralizing to di-

vorced fathers. Moreover, this demoralizing belief is not supported by our best and most recent research on child and adolescent development.

### *Depression, Anxiety, and Eating Disorders*

Teenagers and young adults who have close relationships with their fathers are less likely to become clinically depressed, to develop eating disorders, and to develop anxiety disorders (Caron, 1995b; Cooper & Cooper, 1992; Putallaz & Heflin, 1993; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Steinberg & Steinberg, 1994; Warshak, 1992). So for example, teenage girls often become less clinically depressed after they start spending more time with their divorced fathers (Bassoff, 1994a; Maine, 1993; Pipher, 1994). And since depression is much more common among girls than boys, especially during adolescence, having a close relationship with her divorced father might be especially important for a daughter (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Ebata, Petersen, & Conger, 1990; Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991; Harrington, 1994; Nielsen, 1996; Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994).

### *Dating, Sexuality, and Social Maturity*

Children who are able to maintain a close relationship with their father also tend to be more socially mature and to have fewer problems related to dating and sexuality—particularly if their divorced mother has not remarried (Bassoff, 1994a; Bingham, 1995; Caron, 1995b; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Flaake, 1993; Glickman, 1993; Hirschmann & Munter, 1995; Maine, 1993; Mens-Verhulst, Schreurs, & Woertman, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 1991). For example, many daughters who live with an unmarried mother and have little or nothing to do with their father either tend to grow up too fast by dating, having sex, or getting married at an early age or behave as if they are afraid to grow up and are extremely uncomfortable with dating and sexuality (Aquilino, 1991; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Hetherington, 1991; Maine, 1993; Minninger & Goulter, 1993; Pipher, 1994; Secunda, 1992; Tasker & Richards, 1994).

Generally though, the son seems to pay a greater price than the daughter when he has little or no relationship with his father after divorce. Usually those boys who live with their unmarried mother and see little or nothing of their father are more socially immature, aggres-

sive, delinquent, defiant, and psychologically or emotionally disturbed than other boys their age (Baker, 1992; Blaise, 1993; Buchanan, Mac-coby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Biller, 1993; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Corneau, 1991; Emery, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Guttman, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Kalter, 1990; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Parke, 1996; Scull, 1992; Wallerstein, 1991; Thomas & Forehand, 1993; Weiss, 1994; Zimiles & Lee, 1991).

### *Self-Reliance, Self-Discipline, and Self-Motivation*

In most families it is also the father who contributes most to the children's becoming self-reliant, self-disciplined, and self-motivated. For instance, teenagers of divorced parents say it is their father who gives them the best advice, who teaches them the most, and who pushes them more to do their best (Munsch, Woodward, & Darling, 1995). And after parents divorce, those girls who live with their unmarried father have higher educational goals and higher achievement test scores than girls who live with their unmarried mother (Downey & Powell, 1993). Although most teenagers talk more to their mother than to their father about their social lives, they usually turn to their father to solve other problems, to get advice on education and jobs, and to get encouragement for self-reliance (Almeida & Galambos, 1993; Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Larson, 1993; Montemayor, McKenry, & Julian, 1993; Parke, 1996; Shulman & Klein, 1993; Snarey, 1993; Welsh & Powers, 1991). So although teenage children might see their father as more demanding or more judgmental than their mother, those who remain close to their father often end up being the most self-reliant, self-disciplined, self-motivated, academically and vocationally successful, and achievement oriented (Coulter & Minninger, 1993; Downey & Powell, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Lamb, 1997; Minninger & Goulter, 1993; Marsiglio, 1995; Parke, 1996; Pittman, 1993; Pipher, 1994; Secunda, 1992; Snarey, 1993; Warshak, 1992).

### *Protection from a Depressed Mother*

Having a close relationship with their father can also be a protective buffer for children whose mother is clinically depressed or has extremely depressed ways of thinking and behaving. In such cases the father can teach the children less depressive, less self-defeating ways



of thinking and behaving (Buchanan & Seligman, 1994; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Seligman, 1991; Waxler, Denham, Iannotti, & Cummings, 1992). The father can also help to counteract the overly indulgent, lax parenting that is common among depressed mothers (Ahrons, 1994; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Hetherington, 1991; Hops & Biglan, 1990; Rubin, Lemare, & Lollis, 1990; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). Staying involved with his children after a divorce can also be especially beneficial because a depressed mother tends to relate to the children in ways that interfere with their social skills and self-reliance (Ahrons, 1994; Bassoff, 1994a; Gottlieb, 1995; Harrington, 1994; Hetherington, 1991; Karen, 1994; Miller, 1994; Pittman, 1993; Scarf, 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The father might also be the only parent who can help the children recognize and deal with their own problems because a depressed mother often ignores or denies whatever problems her children are having (Ambert, 1996; Block, 1996; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Dreman & Aldor, 1994; Pittman, 1993; Radke-Yarrow, 1991; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). For example, depressed mothers whose sons continue to have serious psychological problems as adults often claim that there is nothing wrong with their sons other than being "shy and sensitive" or "needing a little more time to grow up" (Block, 1996; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). A depressed woman is also the least likely to get remarried after her divorce—which is unfortunate for her children, for reasons we will soon discuss (Ambert, 1996; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Dreman & Aldor, 1994; Emery, 1994; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Sadly too, the depressed mother is often the least willing to share her children with their father after the divorce (Ambert, 1996; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Pelham, 1993; Radke-Yarrow, 1991; Todorski, 1995). In the words of one depressed mother, "I can't bear the thought that anyone else can do as good a job parenting my children as I can" (Hass, 1994). In any case, a close relationship with their father can be a special blessing for children whose mothers are depressed or chronically unhappy and discontented with their lives.

### ***WHY AREN'T DIVORCED FATHERS MORE INVOLVED WITH THEIR CHILDREN?***

So if most fathers have much to offer and since most dads are so upset about being separated from their children, why do many men

spend so little time with their children after divorce? The answer seems to lie in five areas: (1) our society's attitudes about fathering; (2) the ways in which we idealize mothers and motherhood; (3) the legal system's treatment of divorced fathers; (4) differences in the mother's and father's parenting styles; and (5) the mother's attitudes and behavior.

### *Societal Beliefs About Fathers and Fatherhood*

While we chastise fathers for not being more involved with their children, we simultaneously promote beliefs that make it more difficult for many fathers to be as close to their children as are most mothers—especially after a divorce. Among the most insulting and damaging are that men are “naturally” or “instinctively” inferior to women when it comes to caring for and raising children and that fathers are far less interested in and committed to their children than mothers. Indeed while many of us are offended if someone claims that certain races are genetically or “instinctively” superior to others, we often seem to accept the assertion that men are genetically or “naturally” inferior to women as parents (Farrell, 1994; Fine & Kurdek, 1994; Griswold, 1993; Lamb, 1997; Osherson, 1995; Parke, 1996; Pittman, 1993; Warshak, 1992).

Moreover, the assumption that men are inferior to women as parents is not supported by the research. To begin with, most of what women know about mothering is learned, not instinctive—as is true for men and fathering. And there are human mothers who do not love, bond with, or take care of their children (Allport, 1997; Blakely, 1994; Eyer, 1994; Parke, 1996; Parker, 1996; Thurer, 1994). Likewise, among other mammals there are mothers who ignore, abandon and even kill their young, while the fathers take charge of the feeding and nurturing (Redican, 1976; Tavis, 1992). More to the point, how human fathers and mothers relate to their children is heavily influenced by what their particular society and their ethnic culture at a particular time in history has taught them. For instance, in colonial America fathers were generally considered more important than mothers when it came to the moral, religious, and intellectual upbringing of children. As a result, most books and advice on childrearing were addressed to fathers, not to mothers. But as our country became more industrialized, most fathers and mothers were no longer able to work in or near home providing equally for the family's economic needs. As most men were

driven further from home into salaried jobs, most women were gradually left at home in charge of the children. But the tide changed again during World War II when mothers were needed in the workforce. Only when returning veterans needed their jobs back were we told that “good” mothers should not be employed and that “good” fathers should provide 100% of the family’s income. Yet even during this brief period of the 1950s, only 60% of all parents were able to achieve this concept of “good” parenting. By the 1960s the majority of fathers and mothers once again returned to our *traditional* definitions for the “good” family—a family where both parents provided for the family’s economic needs. But the point is that the way fathers and mothers relate to their children is heavily influenced by what they have been taught—not by their genes or by instincts (Coontz, 1997; Griswold, 1993; Marsiglio, 1995; Parke, 1996; Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Thurer, 1994).

Neither is it true that most fathers are less interested in and less committed to their children than are most mothers. First, many fathers resent having to be away from their children so much because of their long work hours and the demands of the job (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Coltrane, 1996; Gerson, 1993; Griswold, 1993; Larson, 1993; Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Osherson, 1995; Pleck, 1997). Second, when both parents are employed full-time, fathers and mothers generally do similar amounts of housework and childcare (Deutsch, 1993; Pleck, 1997). Third, many fathers are more stressed and more worried about their children than about work-related problems. As experts who have reviewed the research put it: “It is simply not true that a job is more important to a man than his family” (Barnett & Rivers, 1996, p. 56). For example, many fathers suffer from just as much separation anxiety as do mothers when leaving their young children in day care (Deater, Scarr, McCartney, & Eisenberg, 1994). Fourth, when given equal time with their children and when not having to shoulder the family’s financial burdens alone, fathers are generally just as nurturing, attentive, and involved with their children as are mothers. So although most men interact differently than women do with children, fathers are not inferior parents (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Bozett & Hanson, 1991; Coltrane, 1996; Feldman, 1990; Griswold, 1993; Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995; Osherson, 1995; Parke, 1996; Shulman & Collins, 1993).

When it comes to the commitment of divorced fathers, two other findings are worth noting. First, divorced fathers who give their chil-

dren lots of time and attention seldom receive much credit or public recognition (Teachman, 1991; Van Wert, 1992; Warshak, 1992). Second, when a couple is having marital problems, the husband often reacts by spending less time with the children and less time at home; while the wife often does the reverse (Belsky, Youngblood, Rovine, & Volling, 1991; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Hinde & Stevenson, 1995; Pleck, 1997; Scarf, 1995). So in some cases where it might seem as though a father is losing interest in his children prior to divorce, he may just be reacting differently than the mother does to their marital stress.

Finally, upper and middle class white beliefs about motherhood can make it more difficult for fathers to remain closely bonded to their children after divorce. Compared to other races and to lower income groups, these white mothers are less likely to believe "it takes a whole village to raise a child." That is, the white mother from a middle or upper class background is the most likely to be too possessive and uncooperative when it comes to sharing "her" children with other adults, including their own father (Ahrons, 1994; Bell-Scott, 1991; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Reddy, Roth, & Sheldon, 1994).

### *Idealizing Mothers and Motherhood*

Another way of demoralizing fathers is by representing motherhood in overly idealized ways. For example, mothers are often portrayed as the more virtuous, honest, unselfish, and self-sacrificing parent. And motherhood itself is typically presented as the most perfect, the most intense, and the most ideal love that any adult can have for a child (Ackerman, 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Miller, 1994; Parke, 1996; Parker, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

Then too, we tend to idealize mothers when it comes to sex in that fathers are more likely to be portrayed as being unfaithful and being promiscuous (Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Mens-Verhulst, Schreurs, & Woertman, 1993; Thurer, 1994; Tolman, 1991). In reality, though, women in our country are almost as likely as men to commit adultery and are *more likely* to leave a marriage because they have fallen in love with someone else (Adler, 1996; Ahrons, 1994; Braver, 1993; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Emery, 1994; Guttman, 1993; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Pittman, 1990; Reibstein & Richards, 1993; Ripps, 1994). Many of us also seem to be the most forgiving and most

understanding when it is the woman who commits adultery. That is, when a mother commits adultery, we are more likely to tell ourselves that she “couldn’t help it” because she was so lonely or so misunderstood by her husband (Pittman, 1990; Ripps, 1994; Roiphe, 1997). Not surprisingly then, too many children wrongly believe that it was their father, not their mother, who caused the divorce by being unfaithful or by falling in love with someone else (Bassoff, 1994a; Black, 1993; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Flaake, 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson, 1993; Thurer, 1994; Tolman, 1991). And sadly it seems that too many children end up with little or no relationship with their father after divorce partly because they have such idealistic notions about mothers and motherhood (Ackerman, 1996; Berman, 1992; Block, 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Karen, 1994; Miller, 1994; Parke, 1996; Parker, 1996; Scarf, 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Warshak, 1992).

### *The Legal System’s Treatment of Divorced Fathers*

Our idealized beliefs about motherhood and about men’s inferiority as parents are also reflected in our divorce laws. Too few fathers are considered equal to mothers in the standard divorce agreement. Almost 90% of mothers are awarded full custody, while most fathers are restricted to two weekend “visits” each month and scattered vacation days. Indeed, a number of fathers do not fight for joint custody or for more time with their children because they know how unlikely it is that they will be granted equal rights as parents. In other words, divorce laws still tend to reinforce the idea that what children need most from their divorced father is his money, not his involvement in their daily lives (Farrell, 1994; Friedman, 1994; Griswold, 1993; Parke, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Pruett, 1992; Warshak, 1992).

Partly because the law gives most mothers the legal right to move whenever and wherever they want, 40% of divorced fathers do not live in the same state with their children (Bender & Brannon, 1994). Not surprisingly then, many divorced fathers can not see their children more often because they live so far apart (Bender & Brannon, 1994; Blau, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Kruk, 1991; Parke, 1996; Stephen, Freedman, & Hess, 1993). Fortunately, though, if the divorced father has managed to maintain his relationship with his children, as teenagers the kids say that the quality of their relationship with their father is

far more important than how much time they actually spend with him (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997). Nevertheless, there is a growing demand for changing our divorce laws so that fathers will have a better chance of staying bonded to their children (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Cohen, 1994; Farrell, 1994; Kruk, 1991; Pleck, 1997).

### *Mother's and Father's Parenting Style*

The father's relationship with his children can also be influenced by how different or how alike his style of parenting is to their mother's. When both parents are similar in terms of setting limits and disciplining the children, then the father isn't as likely to end up being criticized or shunned. But in cases where the mother continually excuses and tolerates the children's infantile, aggressive, or inappropriate behavior, then the father can come across as much too uptight, inflexible, or demanding. Especially as teenagers, children in such situations sometimes pull away from their father after the divorce in part because he has higher expectations for them and is willing to discipline and to stand up to them when they are out of line (Beer, 1992; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Depner & Bray, 1993; Jones & Schiller, 1992; Pipher, 1994).

The bad news for many divorced fathers is that many mothers abdicate too much power and control to their children—especially if the mother hasn't remarried and especially if the child is a boy. And sadly, these children often end up less socially mature, less self-reliant, less self-disciplined, and less psychologically well-adjusted than their peers (Blau, 1994; Brooks-Gunn, 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Depner & Bray, 1993; Emery, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Parke, 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist, 1994; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Wallerstein, 1991; Warshak, 1992; Weiss, 1994).

These differences in parenting styles after divorce are not especially surprising, however, since it is often the father who is primarily responsible for setting the limits, encouraging self-control, and disciplining the children in married families (Andrews & Dishion, 1994; Caron, 1995b; Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991; Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Lamb, 1997; Larson, 1993; Montemayor, McKenry, & Julian, 1993; Parke, 1996; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Shulman &

Klein, 1993; Snarey, 1993; Welsh & Powers, 1991). Moreover, even well-educated mothers with ample money after their divorce often provide too little supervision, household order, and discipline as single parents (Beer, 1992; Huntley, 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Depner & Bray, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Parke, 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Todorski, 1995; Wallerstein, 1991). And regardless of income, education, or marital status, the woman who did not have a secure, loving relationship with her own parents while she was growing up is the most likely to be overly indulgent and overly submissive with her own children (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1990; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Stroufe, 1989; Todorski, 1995).

This certainly isn't to say that divorced mothers are always more indulgent and more lax than divorced fathers. In fact, whichever parent feels the guiltiest about the divorce is often the one who does the worst job when it comes to setting limits, saying "no" to, or disciplining the children (Ahrns, 1994; Berman, 1992; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Gottlieb, 1995; Warshak, 1992). And whichever parent is guilt-ridden often goes to great lengths to deny that a deeply troubled child has any problems whatsoever (Ambert, 1996; Brockner, Wiesenfeld, & Raskas, 1993; Dreman & Aldor, 1994; Harder, 1992; Lerner, 1993; Lengua, Wolchik, & Braver, 1995; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Warshak, 1992).

### *The Mother's Attitudes Towards the Father*

When it comes to how close children and their fathers are after divorce perhaps the single most important factor is the mother's attitudes towards the father. That is, fathers and children usually remain close only if the mother actively encourages and facilitates their relationship. This isn't to say that mothers always recognize how much power they have in this regard; nor that most mothers intentionally set out to harm the father's relationship with the children. Nevertheless, after divorce too many mothers do not support and may even work against the father-child relationship. Adult children often put the situation this way: "I wish my mother had allowed me to like my father without guilt and that she hadn't made so many negative comments about him" (Berman, 1992, p. 102). "Her tearing down of my father

made me obsessed with finding him. When at 18 I did, I learned that there was a positive side to him that my mother had never told us about" (Einstein, 1994, p. 89). "I remember I hurt my dad over and over again because mom filled me with so many ideas that he was a bad person" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 193). There are even mothers who have gone so far as to offer to return some of the child support money if the father will agree to spend *less* time with the children (Pruett, 1992). As one commentator put it, many men who are accused of being "deadbeat dads" are in fact "beat-dead dads" whose former wives have dead-bolted the kids' hearts against them (Sheehy, 1998). In other words, too many divorced fathers end up with little or no relationship with their children in part because the mother has not been supportive (Ahrons, 1994; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Blau, 1994; Braver, 1993; Buehler & Ryan, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Dudley, 1991; Esposito, 1995; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Greif, 1995; Greif & Kristall, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Hoffman, 1995; Hoffman & Ledford, 1995; Kruk, 1991; Mandell, 1995; Parke, 1996; Pruett, 1992; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994; Wallerstein, 1991; Warshak, 1992).

This isn't to say that there aren't fathers who abandon their children after divorce no matter how hard the mothers work to keep these relationships alive. And this isn't to say that there aren't divorced mothers who dedicate themselves to strengthening the father's bond with their children. As one divorced woman explains: "My mother forced me to make a choice between her and my dad when they divorced, so I see to it that my kids spend time with their dad and stepmom" (Berman, 1992, p. 227). And another mother changed jobs and moved to a new town just so her ex-husband could have joint custody of their two sons. Later she even allowed the boys to live with their father part-time even though he was not paying her any child support (Blakely, 1994). So there are many women who consider themselves to be "good" mothers only when they succeed in keeping the children and their father closely bonded after a divorce (Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Glickman, 1993; Morrison, 1995; Reddy, Roth, & Sheldon, 1994).

### ***How Divorced Mothers Influence the Father-Child Relationship***

But exactly how do mothers help or hinder the father's relationship with their children after divorce? And what kinds of behavior can



therapists, teachers, and friends encourage the mother to develop that might help fathers and children maintain good relationships after the parents divorce?

### *Messages About the Father's Parenting*

To begin with, the mother can either encourage or discourage the children to believe that their father is a good parent. Negatively, the mother's seemingly harmless jokes or casual remarks about the father's abilities as a parent can lead the children to believe that she is the far superior parent. As one adult child puts it: "I was made to believe that my mom was the competent parent and my father was nothing but a buffoon" (Bassoff, 1994, p. 106). But positively, the mother can continue to let the children know that she believes their father is a good parent, regardless of how she might have felt about him as a spouse. Sadly, divorced mothers too often portray the father as the vastly inferior or as a worthless parent (Ahrons, 1994; Aydintug, 1995; Bassoff, 1994b; Bassoff, 1994a; Beer, 1992; Berman, 1992; Blankenhorn, 1994; Farrell, 1994; Blau, 1994; Greif, 1995; Hoffman, 1995; Wallerstein, 1991; Warshak, 1992).

Of course, some women are much more willing than others to give their husband or ex-husband credit for what he actually does as a father. For example, mothers who have always worked full-time outside the home usually give the father much more credit than do full time housewives (Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Pleck, 1997). And mothers who had good relationships with their own fathers tend to be the most complimentary of their own husband or ex-husband as fathers (Caplan, 1990; Pleck, 1997; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Todorski, 1995). Likewise, women who believe that fathers are just as important as mothers for a child's well-being are usually the least critical of their husband as a father (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Blakely, 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Glickman, 1993; Pleck, 1997; Reddy, Roth, & Sheldon, 1994). And, for whatever reason, women are generally less likely than men to give the other credit for what they actually do in raising the children (Clingempeel, Colyar, & Hetherington, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Deutsch, 1993; Teachman, 1991).

In this vein, one of the ways in which children learn how their mother feels about their father as a parent is through her ways of sharing information with him. For example, a mother can imply that

their father is insensitive and harsh by making such comments as: "Don't let your dad find out that your brother is still coming home every weekend from college because he'll get mad." "It's a good thing your dad doesn't know about this!" "I promise not to tell your dad about this." Over time, keeping secrets and withholding information from the father can build an alliance between the children and their mother that works against him. In contrast, the mother can strengthen the father's image as a compassionate, sensitive, and valuable parent by refusing to keep secrets or withhold information from him (Black, 1993; Lerner, 1993; Miller, 1994; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Osherson, 1986; Scarf, 1995).

Along the same lines, the mother can let the children know that she sees their father as a competent, skillful parent by not continually advising, overseeing, or criticizing his ways of relating to the children. A number of divorced fathers say they became closer to their children after the divorce because the mother was no longer there to correct, supervise, and criticize them as parents (Ahrons, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Van Wert, 1992). Unfortunately some men who were the most involved with their children before divorce end up the least involved after divorce. In these cases it seems that the most involved father has more conflicts with his ex-wife over the children than the man who was not a very involved father before the divorce (Kruk, 1991).

### *Financial Matters*

The mother also influences the father's relationship with their children through the messages she sends the children about financial matters. Harmfully, the mother can reinforce the idea that the best way for children to measure their father's love is by how much he gives them financially: "If your father really loved you, he would pay for that." Or the mother can lead children to believe that their father deserves no thanks or appreciation for what he gives them financially. Sadly, many fathers who buy things for their children that the mother is legally supposed to buy with the child support money seldom get any credit for being so unselfish and generous (Cohen, 1994; Teachman, 1991). In any event, too many fathers end up feeling like these two divorced men do: "My kids don't even call me dad. They don't want me to be any part of their life. They just want my money" (Mandell, 1995, p. 111). "I feel like I'm just a wallet, you know, help

pay the bills but not good for much else with my kids” (Osherson, 1995, p. 253). In contrast, the mother can encourage the children to appreciate their father’s financial support and to recognize that his love should not be measured solely by what he gives them financially. Unfortunately, the father often finds that the mother works against him in these respects, even when he is paying all of his child support and even when the mother is a well-educated woman with an income of her own (Arditti, 1992; Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman, 1993; Aydintug, 1995; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Ahrons, 1994; Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman, 1993; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Berman, 1992; Blankenhorn, 1994; Blau, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Mandell, 1995; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994).

A mother can also make the father look good or bad in the children’s eyes when it comes to giving him some say in how his child support money is being spent. Positively, the mother can let the children know that it’s perfectly alright with her for their father to make suggestions about how his money is spent. But negatively the mother can make the children feel that their father is doing something wrong or is being mean to her if he ever asks questions about or disagrees with how his money is being spent. As already mentioned, those mothers who do allow the father to have some voice in how his money is spent usually find that he spends more time with the children and voluntarily spends additional money on them.

Mothers can also convey either positive or negative messages in regard to money that the father sends the children after age 18 when he is no longer legally required to support them. Even in cases where the children have refused to have anything to do with their father for years, the mother sometimes conveys that she believes he is being mean and selfish if he does not send money for such things as college, cars, and weddings (Ambert, 1996; Beer, 1992; Bender & Brannon, 1994; Einstein, 1994; Jones & Schiller, 1992; White, 1994). Recognizing this, some states have legislated that a divorced father is not required to send money to those children past the age of 18 who have alienated themselves from him. Some researchers have even suggested that part of the reason why some children see more of their divorced father if he is well-educated than if he is poorly educated is because they need his money beyond the age of 18 when he is no longer legally required to support them (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990). Given the ways in which money affects their relationships, many divorced fa-

thers end up wondering: How much would my kids have to do with me if I wasn't giving them this money? Why is it that no matter how much I do for them financially, they never feel it's enough and they rarely thank me? Why do they expect so little from their mother financially when they expect so much from me?

Finally, the mother presents the father in either a positive or a negative light by what she leads the children to believe about how he has treated her financially. She can convey that their father was fair and generous with her in their divorce agreement. Or she can portray him as selfish, greedy or mean-spirited. For example, without criticizing him outright, a mother can imply that the father mistreated her if she often seems sad or "jokes" about her not being able to afford nice clothes or a nice house like his. And even in cases where the father is actually paying for almost all of the children's expenses, the mother can make the children believe that their financial situation is far worse than it is. Regardless of how well-educated the mother is or how much money she receives from the father, she can still send children potentially damaging messages such as: "I don't know why your dad wants me to pay for part of your college when he makes more money than I do." "If it weren't for your dad, I'd have a better job now." In contrast, even when she did not get her fair share financially in the divorce, the mother can keep her anger to herself rather than risk hurting the children's relationship with their father. Unfortunately, far too many children get the message that their father mistreated their mother financially (Ahrns, 1994; Aydintug, 1995; Beer, 1992; Berman, 1992; Blau, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Einstein, 1994; Guttman, 1993; Hoffman, 1995; Jones & Schiller, 1992; Martin & Martin, 1992; Warshak, 1992).

This certainly does not mean that all divorced mothers make the fathers look bad when it comes to financial matters. Nor does it mean that the father's sending money is always a concern for the divorced mother. For example, some mothers who are legally entitled to receive child support refuse to take any money from their former husband (Blakely, 1994; Crosby, 1993; Glickman, 1993). As one mother says: "I get a great deal of satisfaction out of knowing that I am supporting myself and my daughter" (Crosby, 1993, p. 107). And there are divorced mothers who realize that the anger they feel over financial matters after a divorce is often a result of their own choices during the marriage. As one such mother puts it: "I could have avoided much of

my anger and what I put the kids through if I had just chosen to be more financially self-sufficient throughout the years of my marriage” (Crytser, 1990, p. 104).

### *Mother's Self-Reliance*

Leaving aside financial matters, a mother can also strengthen or weaken the father's position by how self-reliant and emotionally independent she appears to be. The mother who shows the children that she can take care of herself emotionally, has a satisfying life apart from them, and does not need or want to be mothered or pitied by them makes it easier for them to maintain a relationship with their father. In contrast, the mother whose children generally feel sorry and responsible for her because they see her as so dependent, needy, and fragile can inadvertently encourage them to feel disloyal and guilty about being close to their father. As one adult child puts it, “I felt guilty all the time—guilty because I was angry with mom for needing me so much and guilty for wanting more time with my dad” (Maine, 1993, p. 116).

In extreme cases a mother and child can become so overly dependent on one another and so overly involved in one another's lives that they are referred to as being “enmeshed.” In such cases, the parent and child react and think almost as if they were one person. Divorced women who have not remarried are the most likely to be enmeshed with a child (Amato, Rezac, & Booth, 1995; Ambert, 1996; Bassoff, 1994a; Berman, 1992; Dreman & Aldor, 1994; Emery, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Guttman, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Pittman, 1993; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Warshak, 1992). Similarly, those women who did not have close relationships with their own parents while they were growing up tend to be the most enmeshed with and overly dependent on their own children (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Karen, 1994; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Todorski, 1995). A mother is also the most likely to become enmeshed with a child who has a chronic illness such as asthma or epilepsy (Ambert, 1996; Cohen, 1990; Dadds, 1994; Garrison & McQuiston, 1990; Miller & Wood, 1991; Minuchin, 1995; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Sholevar & Perkel, 1990).

In any case, even though many enmeshed children—most of whom are boys—are very angry at their mother for reasons having to do with

the divorce, they still tend to side with her against their father—sometimes rejecting him altogether. And even when the mother and children are not enmeshed, after a divorce the children's relationship with their father too often suffers if the mother is emotionally fragile, needy, and dependent in ways that make the children feel that they need to protect, to pity, and to take care of her (Ackerman, 1996; Alexander, 1994; Bassoff, 1994a; Berman, 1992; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; Caron, 1995b; Ahrons, 1994; Berman, 1992; Blau, 1994; Caron, 1995b; Caron, 1995a; Depner & Bray, 1993; Emery, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Guttman, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Pittman, 1993; Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Todorski, 1995; Wallerstein, 1991; Warshak, 1992; Weiss, 1994).

### *The Father's Remarriage*

The mother also affects the father's relationship with the children by what she says and does when he remarries. Although 80% of all parents remarry within four or five years after their divorce, the father usually remarries first (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cherlin, 1992). And since 90% of children live with their mother after divorce, her feelings about his marriage and about his wife are easy to detect. Unfortunately what most children see is that their mother is not happy about their father getting married again—in many cases even when the mother initiated the divorce or left the marriage for another man. Although she may be unaware of the negative impact she is having, the mother too often reacts in ways that weaken the children's relationship with their father when he remarries (Ahrons, 1994; Beer, 1992; Berman, 1992; Blau, 1994; Buehler & Ryan, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Jones & Schiller, 1992; Keenan, 1992; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994; Nielsen, 1998; Scarf, 1995; Todorski, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

The mother's reactions take many forms. And many of her feelings and opinions are conveyed most powerfully in nonverbal ways—her tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Negatively, the mother can send children the message that because their father has remarried, he is no longer being nice to her. In reality, what the mother

is often upset about is that her ex-husband is no longer willing to behave as if they were still married to each other. For example, until he remarried, one father explained how his ex-wife continued to violate his privacy: "Their mother would walk right into my house when she came to pick the kids up, help herself to a cold drink, use the bathroom, and make a phone call" (Visher & Visher, 1991, p. 197). In many cases then, the children do not understand that their father is not "being mean" to their mother, but is behaving as a loving husband should in regard to his new marriage. For example, some mothers try to engage the ex-husband in lengthy or daily discussions about very inconsequential events in the children's lives. In these cases, the mother is often trying to continue an intimate, marriage-like relationship and becomes angry when her ex-husband refuses to relate to her this way (Dozier, 1993). Unfortunately though, some children think their father is mistreating their mother when he is doing the kinds of things necessary to create a private and separate life.

On the other hand, the mother can support the father-child bond by not planting ideas that might cause the children to see their father or his wife in a negative light. For example, the mother can refuse to make such comments as these in front of the children: "Your dad was nicer before he met her." "Your dad wasn't cheap and selfish before she came along." "I don't know what's come over your father since they got married." Unfortunately, in many cases the father's wife is continually blamed for the ongoing problems in everyone's lives. As two stepmothers explain: "My stepkids blame me for every problem their mother has. Supposedly I even prevent their dad from giving her more money." "Their mother always bad-mouthed me, but I never knew exactly what she said, so I couldn't defend myself" (Jones & Schiller, 1992, pp. 51 & 109). Fortunately some mothers go to great lengths to reassure the children that they should never feel guilty or disloyal for enjoying their father or his wife. Sadly though, many children end up feeling the stress represented by this stepdaughter's remark: "I didn't dare say anything good about my stepmother to my mom even though my mother divorced my dad" (Berman, 1992, p. 159). Without saying so directly, a mother can still let the children know that she feels sad, insecure, lonely, hurt, or jealous when they are with their father and stepmother. Some may even go so far as to suggest that the children should have had the final say over whether or not their father should have gotten married, by making such remarks as: "I won't get

married again unless you kids tell me it's ok with you." "I don't know why they didn't wait longer to get married." "Your dad always does what's best for him no matter how it affects us."

### *Faulty Memories and Family Myths*

But if a man was a good father while he was married to their mother, then won't his children's happy memories of him offset the other factors that might work against their relationship after a divorce? No, not necessarily. Amazingly, even when a man has been a good father, it is still possible for his children's memories to work against him. Why? How? Part of the answer lies in what researchers are teaching us about how human memory actually operates (Gilovich, 1991; Grimm, 1995; Loftus & Ketcham, 1995; Nisbett & Ross, 1991; Ofshe & Watters, 1995; Schacter, 1996). And other answers involve our need to create consistent stories about our lives, even when we have to distort the truth and invent memories about things that never happened (Gergen, 1992; Howard, 1991; Miller, 1990; Schacter, 1996).

To begin with, our memories—especially memories about what happened in childhood—are largely shaped by what other people tell us, not by what we ourselves actually saw or heard. In fact, what other people tell us about our childhood can literally make us “remember” things that *never* happened. Making things even more complicated, we seldom remember *how* or *when* a particular memory came about. That is, we seldom remember who told us the stories that shape our memories—or under what circumstances they told us these things. For example, the negative things that you “remember” about your father might actually have come from what your mother told you *during or after* their divorce. Likewise, we construct memories bit by bit in erratic ways. Our memories sometimes take great leaps across time, omitting certain crucial events along the way. And events which actually had no relationship to one another or which actually occurred far apart end up being remembered in ways that bear very little resemblance to what really happened. Even our memories of recent events can be distorted in such ways. We also patch scraps of information from the past together and force them to fit the stories that we have been told by people we love and trust. As a result, a family can bury itself in its own fairy dust by creating false memories about people or events that threaten what the family *wants* to believe.

More troubling still, we tend to forget and to distort the memories



that create the most pain or most shame—especially when those memories involve a parent. And we often forget and distort the memories about whichever parent did the most damage to us or to our family. Especially as young children, we do not want to acknowledge that our parents do such things as commit adultery, abuse drugs, lie, cheat, or physically abuse us. Moreover, we have an especially difficult time remembering or accepting painful truths about our mothers. So after our parents divorce, we too often end up wedded to inaccurate, negative memories about our fathers (Ackerman, 1996; Berman, 1992; Block, 1996; Bowlby, 1988; Karen, 1994; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Miller, 1990; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994).

Our memories can also fool us because we have the tendency to create a consistent, logical “story” about our lives—a story that supposedly explains the past and the present in an organized, predictable way. The story around which we organize our memories also tends to be one that makes us feel good about ourselves and that casts the people we happen to like in the most favorable light. That is, we have a hard time remembering those situations in which someone we dislike actually said and did “good” things. We often develop memories that confirm *only* what we *want* to believe, rather than what actually happened. So, for example, if a son has created a story about the past in which his mother is “a saint” and his father or stepmother is “evil,” then his memories will conform to that vision, regardless of the facts. As one stepmother explains: “My stepson is determined to prove that his father and I have ruined his life. Everything he does to destroy his own life is completely his father’s fault and nobody can persuade him otherwise” (Jones & Schiller, 1992, p. 32). In short, when it comes to our memories and our beliefs, we tend to “see it only *after* we are *ready* to believe it.”

Finally, what we remember about the past is heavily influenced by how we are feeling about our present lives. That is, people with serious social, emotional or psychological problems tend to remember and interpret the past in the most negative, most inaccurate ways (Gergen, 1992; Halverson, 1988; McCrae & Costa, 1988). Young people who are clinically depressed or who have personality disorders rarely recall what was good about their parents or their childhood—and they rarely let go of their angry, negative memories even when confronted with absolute proof that those memories are completely untrue (Kramer, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1988; Ofshe & Watters, 1995; Weiner, 1992).

Given this, the best chance a divorced father has for being remembered accurately is when his children are relatively happy, well-adjusted people who are basically satisfied with their lives. This isn't to say that everything we remember is untrue. Nevertheless, we should not assume that our memories alone are accurate proof of what really happened or of what a person was really like—especially not when it comes to such volatile events as our parents' divorce or our perceptions of a father we may seldom or never see after that divorce.

Given how our memories are formed and influenced, the divorced father can often be at a disadvantage when it comes to what his children do and do not remember. To begin with, since 90% of all children live with their mother after divorce, it stands to reason that she has the most power to shape and to create memories—memories about the father and about the divorce. And since most children see less of their divorced father as time passes, they may have to rely heavily on their memories to form their opinions of him. Remember too that if it is the mother who feels especially guilty about the divorce, then she is the most likely to distort the truth and to create memories for the children that cast their father in the worst possible light (Ahrns, 1994; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Gottlieb, 1995; Hudson & Hudson, 1993; Lerner, 1993; Vaughan, 1990). Sadly, the myths and inaccurate memories created within our families wield tremendous power over our feelings and behavior towards our parents and stepparents (Black, 1993; Bloomfield & Kory, 1994; Block, 1996; Gergen, 1992; Howard, 1991; Lerner, 1993). And sadly, young people in therapy often have to be helped to remember anything loving or good about their father because the family myths and inaccurate memories have literally erased all positive memories of him (Berman, 1992; Black, 1993; Block, 1996; Bowlby, 1988; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994).

### *Divorced Fathers and Their Sons*

A final factor influencing the father's relationship with the children after divorce is the child's gender. Generally after divorce fathers have a harder time maintaining a close relationship with their sons than with their daughters. Why? To begin with, the divorced mother is more likely to say and do things around her son that damage his relationship with his father (Depner & Bray, 1993; Greene & Leslie, 1989; Kalter, 1990; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1990; Thomas & Forehand, 1993;

Wallerstein, 1991; Warshak, 1992). As one expert on children of divorce sums up the research, "A mother's negative opinions of her former spouse, if conveyed to her son, can do more harm to him than the lack of contact with his father" (Warshak, 1992, p. 163). Also the son is more apt than the daughter to become overly involved or even enmeshed with his mother in ways that hurt his relationship with his father—especially when the mother has not remarried (Corneau, 1991; Emery, 1994; Guttman, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington, 1991; Pittman, 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Kalter, 1990; Wallerstein, 1991). Then too, the son seems to be especially affected by a divorced mother's bad moods, her depression, and her conflicts with his father (Capaldi, Forgatch, & Crosby, 1994; Colten, Gore, & Aseltine, 1991; Emery, 1994; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1990; Wallerstein, 1991).

Finally, sons have more serious psychological and social problems than daughters from childhood on, whether or not their parents divorce. And many of these sons' problems are related to their being too close and too dependent on their mother and too distant emotionally from their father. In these families the mother is more likely to be the parent who tolerates and makes excuses for the son's dysfunctional, infantile behavior. When these parents divorce then, the troubled son is more likely to withdraw from his father and seek refuge with his mother (Berman, 1992; Corneau, 1991; Guttman, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; Pittman, 1993).

### ***MOTHERS WHO SUPPORT THE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP***

Although there is no reliable way to predict which divorced mothers will be the most supportive of the father's relationship with the children, there are a number of characteristics that supportive mothers usually have in common.

#### ***Mother's Education***

Contrary to what we might expect, a well-educated mother does *not* necessarily make the father's relationship with the children better than does a less-educated mother. In fact, well-educated mothers often

make the situation more stressful. Why? First, as already discussed, well-educated white women tend to have the most possessive, most jealous attitudes about mothering. Second, a well-educated mother is often the angriest and most resentful after divorce because her standard of living generally takes the greatest plunge and because she is often forced to go to work full-time outside the home (Cohen, 1994; Folberg, 1991; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1991; Wagner, 1993). Third, just because a mother is well-educated does not mean that she will be free from the kinds of situations that often make the father's relationship with the children more problematic. That is, there are well-educated mothers who are clinically depressed or chronically unhappy with their lives after divorce (Ahrns, 1994; Karen, 1994; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Radke-Yarrow, 1991), who have such poor relationships with their own parents that they relate to their own children in ways that can hurt the father's bond with the children (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Scarf, 1995; Todorski, 1995), and who are too indulgent and lax as single parents (Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1992; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Guttman, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In other words, being well-educated is no guarantee that the mother will be supportive of the father's relationship with the children after divorce.

### ***Mother's Guilt or Ambivalence***

How guilty or ambivalent the mother feels about the divorce can also influence how supportive she is of the father's relationship with the children. When a mother does not feel especially guilty or ambivalent about the divorce, she often has an easier time portraying the father in a positive way to the children and supporting his relationship with them (Ahrns, 1994; Braver, Whitley, & Ng, 1993; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Gottlieb, 1995; Guttman, 1993; Hudson & Hudson, 1993; Lerner, 1993; Minuchin & Nichols, 1994; Pledge, 1992; Martin & Martin, 1992; Vaughan, 1990).

### ***Mother's Employment***

As already mentioned, when a mother works full-time outside the home throughout her marriage, the children and their father are often

closer than when the mother is not employed. In part this happens because the father and children generally spend the most time together when both parents are wage-earners and because employed women often relate to their children in ways that make it easier for the father and children to bond. So, for example, children often say they feel much closer to their father when both parents are employed than when their mother is a housewife (Paulson, Koman, & Hill, 1990; Richards & Duckett, 1991). In any case, whether the parents remain married or get divorced, fathers and children usually have closer relationships when the mother has always worked outside the home (Ahrns, 1994; Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Biller, 1993; Blau, 1994; Chira, 1998; Cohen, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1991; Larson, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994; Morrison, 1995; Lerner & Galambos, 1991; Marsiglio, 1995; Parke, 1996; Peters, 1998; Pleck, 1997; Warshak, 1992).

### *Mother's Relationship with Her Parents*

The kind of relationship the mother has with her own parents also seems to influence her feelings about the father's involvement with their children. The mother who had a close, loving relationship with both of her parents tends to relate to her own children in ways that make it easier for the father and children to be close to one another. In contrast, the mother tends to be overly jealous, critical, and unsupportive of her husband's relationship with their children when she did not have a good relationship with her own father and mother (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Caplan, 1990; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Minuchin, 1995; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1990; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Stroufe, 1989; Todorski, 1995).

### *Mother's Marital Status*

For reasons already discussed, when the divorced mother has remarried, the father and children generally get along best. Although 80% of divorced mothers do remarry within 4 years, the fathers usually remarry first. So at least for a brief period of time, the mother is usually still single when the father remarries. Unfortunately, those mothers who never remarry or who only remarry long after their divorce often have extremely dependent or enmeshed relationships with their children which, in turn, makes it more difficult for the father

and children to be close (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Main, 1993; Miller, 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1990; Sameroff & Emde, 1989; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). But regardless of the reasons, a divorced mother who has remarried is usually the most supportive of the father's relationship with the children (Ahrns, 1994; Ambert, 1996; Ambert, 1989; Beer, 1992; Berman, 1992; Blau, 1994; Bray & Kelly, 1998; Buehler & Ryan, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Crytser, 1990; Emery, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Greif & Kristall, 1993; Hetherington, 1991; Jones & Schiller, 1992; Keenan, 1992; Martin & Martin, 1992; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Pittman, 1993; Visser & Visser, 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Warshak, 1992).

### ***Mother's Mental Health***

Finally the mother who is mentally well-adjusted and relatively content with her life after a divorce is usually much more supportive of the father's relationships with the children than the clinically depressed or chronically unhappy woman (Ahrns, 1994; Ambert, 1996; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993; Gottlieb, 1995; Hetherington, 1991; Pittman, 1993; Pledge, 1992; Scarf, 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Todorski, 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

## **CONCLUSION**

In many ways then, our research is reminding us that divorced fathers are often demoralized and demeaned in ways that make it difficult for them to maintain close relationships with their children. Not only many of our attitudes about motherhood and fatherhood, but many of our personal and legal beliefs about divorced men and divorced women work against fathers. And not only a mother's feelings about her ex-husband, but also her own family background, mental health, marital status, guilt, and attitudes about money influence how supportive she is of the father's relationship with their children. Then too, each child's own memories, gender, and mental health work either for or against the father after the parents' divorce. At a societal, legal, and personal level, we still have far to go in providing the support and the compassion that divorced fathers deserve as adults whose marriages have ended, but whose feelings, needs, and desires as parents endure.

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