

## DISCLOSURE OF DIVORCE PLANS TO CHILDREN: WHAT THE CHILDREN HAVE TO SAY

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**ABSTRACT:** Divorce has become a common experience for children. One part of the process that children of divorcing parents experience is the time when they are informed of their parents' approaching separation or divorce. In this study, 20 adults from eight families who had experienced the divorce of their parents when they were younger were interviewed using a guided interview format. At least two siblings from each family except one was interviewed. Qualitative analyses of data revealed interesting themes around the questions of how the participants were told about the impending separation or divorce, who told them, whether or not siblings were present, how they reacted to the news, and how they would have preferred being told.

**KEY WORDS:** divorce; children and divorce; parental disclosure of divorce plans.

Divorce has become a common experience for children. It is estimated that one out of every two children will experience the divorce of their parents before the age of 18 (Emery, 1988; Furstenberg, 1990). Divorce is not a single event that takes place in one moment of time, but a process that begins long before separation and, for some, lasts the entire lives of everyone in the family. There is a great deal of literature that investigates and describes the effects that the entire

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process of divorce has on children (e.g., Amato, 1994, 2000; Morrison & Cherlin, 1997; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). From this, we know that divorce in general has an impact. However, we do not know how much of an impact specific parts of the process have on children. Therefore, this study explores one of those parts, divorce disclosure, or the time when children learn that their parents are separating or divorcing, to learn more about children's perceptions of that experience.

Existing literature on divorce disclosure is directed at parents and is not empirically based. Presently, parents do not have access to an adequate, empirically based model on which to base their divorce disclosure strategies to their children. In order to develop adequate models for parents to help their children in this area, we must first understand more about children's perceptions and reactions to the way they are told about their parents' divorces.

The present study sought to understand the retrospective experiences of adults whose parents divorced when they were children in relation to the manner in which they were informed of their parents' decision to divorce. It also investigated participants' preferences for how children can be told of an impending divorce.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Very little research has been conducted on how children are informed of their parents' decision to divorce, especially in comparison to the vast amount that has been written on the effects of divorce on children. Of the few studies that do exist, most were conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In reviewing this topic, Ducibella (1995b) found 13 studies that purported to address the issue of informing children of the divorce decision, but only two of these focused specifically on informing the child (Cushman & Cahn, 1986; Rosenthal, 1979).

Several findings from these studies are significant. First, parents do not always tell their children of their decision to divorce (Hingst, 1981; Jacobson, 1978; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Waldron, Ching, & Fair, 1986). Jacobson (1978) found that as many as one-third of children in his study were not informed by their parents about the divorce. The effects of not informing children of an impending divorce appear to be harmful in terms of children's satisfaction with their parents' communication and the children's self-esteem (Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995).

Second, one parent, usually the mother, more often handles divorce

disclosure. Waldron, Ching, and Fair (1986) found that mothers most often inform children of separation (76%) and divorce (61%). Both parents told the children, either together or separately, about separation 26% of the time, and about divorce 37% of the time in their study.

Third, the overall initial reaction of children to divorce disclosure was negative (Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Waldron et al., 1986). Ducibella (1995b) found the most common response (45%) to divorce disclosure was "clearly unhappy."

After reviewing the literature, Ducibella (1995a) studied how children were informed of their parents' divorce decision and how it related to children's emotional reaction to the news, their views of their relationships with their parents, and how they saw their own general ability to cope. He used a structured interview format in which responses mostly were limited to Likert-type scale answers. Interestingly, the two results he deemed most significant did not involve how disclosure was handled; rather, they had to do with the children's characteristics and their reactions to the news. First, there was an inverse relationship between the degree of unhappiness the child felt at the news and the child's age. Second, there was an inverse relationship between the child's fear of abandonment and the child's age at parental separation. It seems that older children may either be more aware of tension in the home and wish to be rid of it or perhaps older children worry less about their own wellbeing because they are more sure that their needs will be met. Older children have more experience from friends whose parents may have divorced that may help them put separation and divorce in perspective. Since Ducibella's work, no research has focused specifically on how children are informed of their parents' divorce.

A few studies have reported disclosure patterns as part of a larger study of divorce and its aftermath. For example, Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) reported that half of the young children in their 25 year study first learned of the impending divorce on the day their parents separated, and that others were not told at all or were given explanations that made no sense to them. In a study of 160 families experiencing separation and divorce (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997), slightly more than half of the mothers reported that their children learned of the separation from them (30%), from both parents (17%), or from their fathers (9%) prior to physical separation, and more than one-quarter of the children did not learn of the separation until it occurred. In the same study, children reported that 68% of them learned of the separation from one or both parents before its actual occurrence, and 30% learned during or after the separa-

tion. The study authors attributed differences in parent and child reports to their identification of different moments when children were told of the separation.

Burns and Dunlop (1999) measured childrens' feelings about their parents' divorce at the time of the divorces as well as three and 10 years later. At the 10 year mark, participants also were asked about their feelings at the time of the divorce. The study authors found that feelings of sadness, shock, and disbelief were often strong at the time of the divorce, but declined over time. Feelings of relief and gladness, also present at the time of the divorce, increased over time. Burns and Dunlop found that participants "substantially overestimated" their negative emotions reported at the time of the divorce. This study examined children's feelings about the divorce in general at the time of the divorce or within two years of the divorce and did not examine participants' feelings about divorce disclosure at the time they were informed of the divorce. These findings may suggest that negative feelings about divorce dissipate as children adjust to the new family structure. Therefore, it is even more important to pay attention to retrospective reports of negative feelings.

The present study involved an in-depth, retrospective look at participants' divorce disclosure stories. No research has been conducted on children's preferences for divorce disclosure or siblings' experiences of divorce disclosure. Therefore, the current study integrates what is already known about parental divorce and divorce disclosure from the literature with what study participants remember happened and how they would have preferred disclosure to occur.

## METHOD

In-depth individual interviews were conducted with adults who reflected on their experiences of parental divorce disclosure. Because the study was exploratory and little is known about this issue, a qualitative format, more concerned with the individual experiences than with group statistics, was employed. A pilot study of three participants was conducted to test the order and effectiveness of the interview questions and to alert the researchers to issues that may not have been anticipated. The interview schedule was effective and no changes were made. Data from these three interviews were therefore included in the final results.

The sample was recruited using word of mouth and snowballing techniques. Initial contacts were made through the first author's social

networks. Twenty adult children from eight families whose parents were divorced during their childhood served as participants. Selection criteria included: (a) memories of the divorce experience, and (b) having at least one sibling who also remembered the disclosure and was willing to participate in the study. We were curious about similarities and differences between sibling reports of the divorce disclosure. Five males and 15 females were interviewed. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 51 with an average age of 26. The average age at the time of the divorce was 13.5 with ages ranging from 4 to 23. The average number of years since the divorce was 14 with a range of 1.5 to 42 years. The families were mostly middle-class, predominantly members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and had grown up in various part of the United States, including Utah, California, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and New Jersey. Confidentiality was maintained through coded names, and none of the participants was acquainted with or personally knew the investigators.

Investigator bias is an important factor when gathering and analyzing qualitative data. All of the authors of this paper have divorced parents. The parents of the first author—the interviewer and primary investigator—were separated when she was 13 and divorced when she was 15. She is the fourth of seven children, but a functional oldest in many ways because she was the oldest at home when her parents separated. She recalls that she found out that her father was leaving when she confronted her mother after overhearing her talking on the telephone to her lawyer. She also recalls that she was very upset and missed a lot of school that year. One younger sister found out from a school counselor who assumed that she knew what was happening.

Although concern about researcher subjectivity is legitimate, insider status can be beneficial when conducting qualitative research. Because of her life experiences, the first author possessed “insider status” with respect to her informants. Such status has several advantages when conducting qualitative research. For example, in his research with couples experiencing infertility, Daly (1992) noted that “the deliberate use of self in the research process helped [him] to unravel the experience of the other” (p. 110). Bruyn (1966) argued that various aspects of insider status, such as familiarity with the language of the participants, produces a “subjective adequacy” that strengthens the conduct and products of qualitative research. Farnsworth (1996) used her insider status as a bereaved parent to study the bereavement process in other parents, noting that her own experiences enabled her participants to open up to her freely.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format with

specific questions asked in an open-ended manner that promoted and did not limit participants' descriptions of their experiences. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Data were initially read and reread to develop tentative ideas regarding themes, categories, and patterns. Next, codes were formulated by breaking data into smaller bits and rearranging them into categories that could be compared.

The computer software program QSR NUD\*IST™, Version 4 (Qualitative Research and Solutions, 1995) was used to assist in this process. This computer program does not manipulate data; rather it functions as a data management tool by facilitating the coding of words and phrases, identifying themes, and generating reports that show all data coded in a particular way. Such reports were used to identify participant quotes that illustrate themes reported in this study. Codes and themes were revised and collapsed as data from each reading were analyzed. Although the data were organized into codes, they also were considered and analyzed together as a coherent whole. Data were analyzed on several levels simultaneously: First, each case was explored individually. Second, the cases were looked at intrafamilially, comparing sibling reports. Third, the cases were explored interfamilially. Researcher notes and contact summary sheets were used throughout analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Issues of reliability and validity were addressed by using multiple transcript readers, including the second author, in order to compare interpretations and receive feedback when analyzing the data. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached; the readers reached consensus quickly and easily. Consistency between reader coding reduced researcher bias. Also, the purity of the data was preserved as much as possible by using direct quotes in the research report. In addition, validity is strengthened by the degree to which siblings converged on recollections of divorce disclosure. Those who found out about their parents' impending divorce in the same manner described much the same event, at times using the same words and phrases to describe their experiences.

## RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore adult children's experience of parental divorce disclosure and also their preferences regarding it. Within this framework, the study looked at similarities and differences

among the experiences of siblings. Several themes emerged from the interviews and are organized by research question. All names used in this section are pseudonyms.

### *How Participants Were Informed*

Three themes were identified in regard to how participants were informed about their parents' divorce. First, disclosure was not an entire "family affair." Disclosure did not take place with mother, father, and all siblings present. With two exceptions, participants learned of their parents' divorce from one parent. In this study, the number of participants who found out from their mothers versus their fathers was equal, with nine reporting that disclosure came from their mothers and nine from their fathers. Examined by families, six participants representing three families agreed that they learned of the divorce from their mothers; six participants representing two families agreed that they learned from their fathers; and three participants from one family agreed that they learned from both parents together, although one participant said that her mother did the talking. Five participants representing two families reported that some learned from their mothers (two from one family each) and some from their fathers (three participants representing two families).

Most participants found out about the divorce in a different manner than their siblings, which may have been due to children's ages, their relationships with their parents, or any number of factors. One participant described this differential treatment when she said, "[They treated us] completely different. If you were to talk to my siblings you'd be shocked about how different all of our stories are."

Second, treatment of siblings was often influenced by birth order or age. Parents relied on oldest children more than younger children, with oldest children often serving as parental confidants. Sometimes these children learned of the divorce before their siblings or even before the other parent. For example, one participant remembers her mother saying, "Gretchen, this is going to happen and I need you to . . . straighten up and take some responsibility." Youngest children also were treated differently, often "sheltered" from the effects, and even knowledge, of the divorce. Many older siblings expressed that the youngest child, no matter what her or his age, did not understand what was going on. One participant noted of her youngest sibling, age 12 at the time, "I think we really left him out of a lot. Now I don't think [he was too young to know what was going on]."

Third, the moment of disclosure was memorable, no matter the length of time since its occurrence. Several participants were surprised at how well they were able to remember the disclosure. One participant commented: "It's something that's going to stick in their mind forever. I can't remember much about the divorce, but I will never forget the room. I will never forget where my dad was sitting, what he was sitting on." This illustrates the significance of this moment and the impact that it has on children.

### *Reactions to Divorce Disclosure*

Reactions to the news of the divorce varied widely among participants and within families. The recalled emotions ranged from sad to happy, upset to relief, and from shocked to not surprised. Most participants reported feeling many emotions at the same time, sometimes conflicting emotions. Three themes were identified in their accounts. First, the type of reaction—whether positive, negative, or mixed—was related to the perception that conditions would be relatively better or relatively worse after the divorce. The three types were represented by nearly equal numbers of participants, with seven reporting positive reactions, six negative, and five mixed. Most common positive reactions included feelings of relief and happiness. One participant, who suffered physical abuse from his father, saw the new situation as an improvement because it offered the possibility of a better life. He related: "I [was] sick of it . . . so when she told me that, I was very happy. . . . I felt a big relief." Those who reacted negatively imagined that life would be worse if their parents separated. Their responses included, "I started crying and being upset about it," "I just didn't want it to happen," and "I didn't want my dad to move out." Those who reacted with mixed feelings often perceived that conditions would be better because their parents wouldn't be fighting anymore, but they would also be worse because one parent would be gone. Thus, their reactions were conflicted.

The second theme identified was that reactions were influenced by the manner in which disclosure was handled. Who told participants and how they were told affected immediate reactions. For some, being told by one parent led them to blame one parent for the divorce or to hear only one side of the story. Several participant accounts illustrated the impact of the manner in which disclosure occurred on reactions to divorce. For example, one participant who was told of the divorce before her siblings felt pressure that she carried around for a month until everyone else found out. She said, "I would have preferred that my dad



not tell me anything beforehand because that was a pretty heavy burden to bear. . . . I didn't really feel like I could talk to anyone at that point about it." Another participant, who found out as her dad was crying and packing his belongings while her mother looked on, reacted by feeling scared and badly for her dad.

The final theme that emerged was based on participant reactions that developed when the separation and divorce process was long lasting. For some participants, parents did not divorce for up to two years after initial disclosure of separation. By the time their parents' divorce was finalized, they were relieved that it was finally over. Their attitude was "Get on with it," and they may have been encouraging the divorce. One participant explained:

Pretty much everyone was like, "This has got to come down." We were sick of it. Oh, we were sick of it. . . . We were all really pushing for it, at least my sisters and I. We were pushing for a separate life. This is mom and her life and this is dad and his life, and we'll associate with them separately.

### *Preferences for Disclosure*

We explored how participants thought children should find out about their parents' divorce. Participants discussed how they wished their parents had told them and also how they would tell their own children if they were in a similar situation. Their preferences were interesting considering that only five participants including two from the same family actually endorsed their parent's disclosure method and would not have changed anything about that moment. Two major themes and several sub-themes emerged as participants spoke freely on this matter.

*Unity, maturity, and sensitivity to children's needs.* In general, participants felt that separating parents should display more unity, maturity, and sensitivity to their children's needs when disclosing an impending separation and divorce. Some participants also noted how difficult such behaviors were for their parents, given the nature of the circumstances and the likelihood that their parents were upset themselves. Thus, as adults, they recognized that these preferences might not always be possible. Participants' particular preferences for divorce disclosure follow.

*Unity and maturity—both parents should participate.* The most common preference was that both parents participate in telling the children about the divorce and that they handle the telling in a mature manner, meaning that they take responsibility for their own actions and not blame each other. Eighteen of 20 participants mentioned the importance of this, but only three were fortunate enough to experience it. Those who heard from only one parent heard only one side, often leading them to blame one of their parents. One participant, told only by her mother, explained:

I would have wanted it to be mutual. I would have wanted my mom and dad to sit us kids down and together talk to us, because the way it was presented . . . I remember feeling like, “we girls are here and I’m telling you and we’re against dad. Dad’s the enemy.” That’s the way it was presented and that’s the way I’ve always thought my dad to be.

Participants felt strongly about the necessity of parents’ handling the disclosure in a mature manner. This included showing a “united front” by taking responsibility for their own actions and not placing blame on each other. Common suggested phrases included, “This is both our faults” and “This has nothing to do with you [the children].” Also, some emphasized making a conscious, logical decision on how to tell the children in order to prevent the harmful effects of hearing things “through the grapevine” or in an explosive moment. One participant had the following advice for divorcing parents:

Logically think about how and when, rather than emotionally decide how and when, or situationally decide. Emotionally and situationally you don’t really decide. It’s just kind of whatever happens, happens. You find out however you find out along the way. Think about it. Address it. Make a decision that “we’re going to do this thing here. . . .”

*Unity and maturity—sibling presence.* The second preference was to have siblings present. Seven of the participants said that they thought parents should tell all of their children together. They often described a “family meeting” type atmosphere in which they would “sit the kids down in the evening and say, ‘OK, everyone, no plans tonight.’ And just have a big question and answer session.” Many did not mention whether all children should be present; however, they did say that they

would tell their children according to their level of understanding, thereby affecting who was present for disclosure.

*Sensitivity in explaining and answering questions about divorce.* Third, participants felt strongly about the manner in which divorce was communicated to them. They focused on two issues: that parents should explain the divorce and what is going on, and also that children should be able to express their own opinions and ask questions. Many said that they wished their parents had explained things better. Some common responses were, "Tell them exactly what's going to happen in detail so the kids don't get scared," "It's important to know ahead of time what's going on and some of the thought processes of why they are choosing to get divorced," and "Just be more open with the children." Several participants had been able to learn from their parents' mistakes because their parents had taken responsibility for their own actions and told their children where they made mistakes in the marriage. Many participants mentioned the importance of being able to say how they felt, which unfortunately did not happen often. One participant summarized this issue well:

Keep it open for the kids to comment. I don't ever remember us commenting on the situation or ever being asked, "What do you think?" by our mother because I don't think she necessarily wanted to know what we thought. [They never asked,] "What's your opinion?" and "What do we need to do, as parents, to make it easier on the kids?"

Two of the participants suggested that parents have another meeting with their children the day after disclosure, once the shock had worn off, to answer questions and clarify the situation. Participants explained that open communication following disclosure is equally important as during disclosure.

*Sensitivity in providing love and security.* The fourth theme to emerge regarding preferences is the importance of making children feel loved and secure. For example, one participant, who felt guilty for many years because she instigated the divorce discussion, explained how she would handle disclosure with her own children: "I would make sure everybody sat down and all the questions were in the open. I would not let anybody get up unless they believed that they were still loved and it was not their fault."

*Skepticism about making changes in disclosure.* Participants repeatedly said, "This is how I would have wanted them to tell me, but it could not have happened that way because. . . ." Reasons given included parental inability to be in the same room together without fighting, lack of a close relationship with parents, and that parents were too emotional at the time. For example, one participant said,

I would have preferred that my mom kept her feelings about my dad to herself and encouraged us kids just to love him because he is our father. But I know those are impossibilities. My mom was scared. She was alone and she had no one to talk to.

Another, in giving his preference for his parents' showing a united front, explained:

I would say make it a "we" decision because then one person is not the bad guy. But then at the same time, I don't necessarily think that would happen. . . . They're getting divorced because they can't work together.

Despite all of the advice offered about how parents should tell their children, three of the participants still said that there really was no "good" way. Essentially, parents can try to make the effects as minimal as possible, but the kids still are going to suffer.

### *Discomfort with the Idea of Divorce*

The second general theme that emerged from the data regarding preferences was participants' discomfort with the idea of divorce, especially their own. Almost all of the participants were uncomfortable thinking about the possibility of getting divorced themselves. Comments included, "That's a tough one," "I don't really want to think about that," and "That's really hard to imagine because that's just not going to ever, ever happen."

## **DISCUSSION**

Although divorce disclosure is only one piece of the divorce process, the moment of disclosure was memorable for participants. Even those who remembered little else about the divorce or their childhood remem-

bered the disclosure. The implications of the how memorable was the divorce disclosure are significant. Memories of this moment, and the impact it had on subsequent perceptions and reactions as described by the participants, indicates that more attention should be given to helping parents know less harmful ways to inform children of their decision to divorce, because the children are likely to remember it for a long time. The memory is likely to affect their attitudes, relationships, and well-being.

The findings for how participants were informed also are notable because of the strong preferences participants had for how they would have preferred to have been told about their parents' divorce. Only four of the participants would not have changed anything about the way that they were told. All others described what they wish their parents had done. These findings seem to indicate that divorce disclosure for most participants was a negative memory, supporting Ducibella's (1995b) findings.

A surprising finding was that nearly all of the participants found out about their parents' divorce from one parent. This is important given the number of participants who said that they would have preferred that both of their parents tell them together. The number of participants who found out from their fathers alone also was surprising, given the typical image of mothers telling the children (Ducibella, 1995b). This finding is not consistent with findings from Waldron et al.'s (1986) study that fathers almost never told their children alone.

Oldest and older children in this sample played a more active role in the divorce process, often serving as their parents' confidants. In addition, some of the participants encouraged their parents to divorce when the separation extended for a long period of time, and their opinions seem to have been valued and respected by their parents. Children's encouraging their parents to divorce raises special concerns. How much responsibility should children take or be given for initiating or promoting their parents' divorce? Participants who were teenagers at the time of the disclosure seem to have been very influential at a time when parents could have been considered quite vulnerable to outside suggestions because of the stress they were under. Is this too much responsibility for teenagers? One participant said, "yes." Looking back, he said very sincerely (and sarcastically) that he would do things differently: "I was 16, like I knew a whole lot, telling my parents to separate." Although they may have good intentions, some might argue that children are operating from a point of view based on limited experience. On the other hand, some might assert that teenagers may, in

some cases, be more able to think clearly than their parents during that time, helping to guide them through the divorce process or serve as “sounding boards.”

That participants’ reactions were based on the perception that conditions would be “better” or “worse” after the divorce is consequential. Interestingly, more than half of the participants mentioned feeling relieved when their parents decided to divorce. They were tired of the fighting and tense conditions between their parents. This implies that it may be common for children whose parents fight frequently to want their parents to get divorced because the idea of their separating appears relatively “better” than their staying together. This supports the findings of other studies that suggest that divorce may have a positive effect on children living in homes characterized by high levels of conflict (Ahrons, 1994; Calvin, 1981; Goode, 1964).

If children base their negative reactions on the perception that conditions would be worse when their parents divorce, then it is instrumental for parents to address those concerns, in an attempt to eliminate at least part of their worries. For example, if children are afraid because they are unsure of what will happen to them or worried that they will never see a parent again, it would be helpful for parents to alleviate these fears by telling them what will happen as much as they can. This is not to imply that all negative feelings can or should be eliminated through communication. Rather, this is an opportunity for parents to ease the difficulty created by divorce by attempting to resolve unnecessary fears and concerns. Negative reactions that are strictly due to the manner of disclosure can be reduced. Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) noted that although few parents discuss divorce fully and well with their children, such discussions have potential protective effects for children.

Clear preferences for divorce disclosure were identified by those who know best—children of divorced parents who have had time to reflect on its effects. These preferences are helpful in beginning to establish a divorce disclosure model that can serve as a guide for parents. For example, the request that both parents be present in effect creates more security for children. If they are able to see their parents’ working together, they are likely to have fewer fears about the future or worries that they will be forced to choose sides (Goldstein & Solnit, 1984). The preference for parents to show love and support is also very important. Telling and showing children that they are loved, which includes not bad-mouthing their other parent, can do much to alleviate children’s fears and create feelings of safety. These safe feelings are

critical for child well-being considering the many changes that are taking place in their lives.

The preference for parents to communicate openly during and after disclosure lends insight into children's experience of the divorce process. Children need time to integrate and make sense of the changes that are going to occur. They need to be able to ask questions after initial disclosure in order to process the new information. This preference has great importance because how divorce disclosure is handled may influence long-term parent-child relationships (Thomas et al., 1995).

The fact that participants doubted whether their preferences would have been possible with their own parents leads us to question whether it is possible, in general, for parents to handle disclosure in a beneficial way when they are experiencing so much distress themselves. Despite the responses of many participants that suggest otherwise, other data indicate that it is possible. In addition to one of the families in this study, in which the parents called a family meeting to tell the children together and answer questions, the researchers know of several other parents who similarly made conscious decisions to tell their children and were open with them in communicating their love for them. Also, in dealing with this issue, one participant initially said that she did not think it would have been possible until she remembered a good friend of hers whose parents also were divorced. She questioned why it was that her parents are unable to have a civil conversation while her friend's parents were able to sit down regularly and talk about the needs of the children. Therefore, perhaps the issue is not whether it is possible; instead, the questions may be: How are they able to do it? and, What can be learned from these examples that will help other families facing similar challenges?

### *Limitations*

The generalizability of the findings to the population of children of divorced parents is limited due to the small sample size, its non-random selection, and the homogeneity of class, race, and religious backgrounds. Although this was appropriate for this exploratory study, larger samples with families that are racially and ethnically diverse would increase the applicability of the findings. Finally, there was a range of time for the participants since the time of the divorce disclosure. The data from this project most likely would be different if children were interviewed soon after the disclosure.

## IMPLICATIONS

### *Clinical Practice*

Due to the prevalence of divorce today and the frequency of dealing with divorce issues in therapy, the results of the study are especially applicable to clinical practice, including marital therapy, divorce therapy, and mediation. The results are especially helpful for therapists, divorce mediators, and families in deciding together the best plans of action for divorce disclosure. Many couples decide to divorce during the course of therapy. Unfortunately, when this decision is made, therapy is often seen as a failure and is terminated. Therapists could be extremely helpful at this point in assisting in decisions around disclosure as well as other aspects of the divorce process. They could help parents understand issues their children may be dealing with or may deal with in the future. For example, issues related to insecurity and children's needs to feel loved and supported could be brought out and discussed. In addition, it would be helpful to discuss the time it may take for children to process this new information, and the possibility of having a question and answer period some time after the divorce disclosure.

### *Future Research*

A logical step forward in understanding divorce disclosure would be to explore parents' experiences, focusing primarily on parents who handled divorce disclosure in a mature manner. The fact that this is possible is not enough; we must know how it is possible in order to replicate better conditions for other children. Together with information gathered from more children of divorce, this information could be used to develop a model or models of disclosure that could be recommended to parents. The results from this study could also be used to design a study that examines the long term effects of divorce disclosure and how they relate to the divorce process and its outcomes for children.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that divorce disclosure is a memorable experience within the divorce process and that it has an effect on children's immediate and long term reactions to divorce. Participants had clear preferences for how they would have preferred to have been



told and offered many words of advice for parents who are divorcing. In many ways, the title of this report could have been, "What I wish my parents would have known when they were divorcing."

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