Think of post-divorce parental conflict as a form of child abuse. Every argument, every vindictive act, scars not just your former spouse, but also the child you claim to love. The child who loves and needs you both. The child who feels a little worse about him or herself every time a parent is put down. The child who subconsciously understands that she is a part of each of you. So, if you or your former...
The spouse is bad, then the child must somehow be bad, too. Right?

Count the blows.
Measure all those hidden scars.

A parent can compile a pretty accurate portrait of how much—or how little—his or her children will be damaged by divorce. That is the consensus of four ASU psychologists who study different aspects of divorce.

Sanford Braver works with non-custodial fathers.
Bill Griffin maps conflict triggers. Sharlene Wolchik works with moms.
Irwin Sandler helps the kids.
ost-marital conflict is the single best predictor of long-term outcomes for the child. That’s where all the dynamite is,” says Bill Griffin, who directs ASU’s Marriage and Family Therapy Program as well as its Marital Interaction Lab. Researchers at the lab assess married couples, divorced couples, couples where one partner has a chronic illness, and father/child interaction.

“With divorce, we find that conflict is most prevalent when at least one party feels that he or she has been betrayed,” Griffin says. “The implied relationship agreement or marital contract was broken in some way. Whether that was ‘until death us do part’ or ‘I’ll take care of you,’ or whatever that person perceived.”

Griffin’s work involves ways to diffuse such conflict to spare the child, whom he views as the ultimate, yet often unintentional, victim. His study subjects are selected randomly from public divorce records, usually within six months of their divorce. Some first work with Sanford Braver, others head straight to Griffin’s laboratory.

“The ‘lab’ is a living room-like setting with two fairly unobtrusive cameras. Divorced parents are asked to take a seat and discuss some child-related issue while the cameras roll. They talk for about 15 minutes. Then they review the tape and record their feelings or reactions to each verbal or non-verbal action they observe. Behavior/reaction responses from many subjects are coded in this way. Together, they form a type of ‘If, Then’ response scenario.

For instance, if one partner rolls his or her eyes, then the other might feel angry. If one dismisses the other’s comments, frustration might result. By mapping things that trigger or inflame conflict, Griffin and the other ASU scientists hope to teach ex-couples how to avoid or diffuse tensions.

“What we find is that mothers tend to press agendas, steering discussions back to each point until it can be resolved,” Griffin says. “One such issue might be: ‘You’ve been late the last three times you’ve picked up the kids.’ While she may well have a valid issue, it can have explosive overtones. The mother’s perspective might be that the father is intentionally inconveniencing her on the ‘one night she has off,’ or that the waiting children get the message that they are not important in dad’s life. The father’s perspective might be that his car is old and breaking down because he is strapped financially, or that he is working overtime to make ends meet.

A noncombative couple might work to solve the problem. They might say things such as, ‘How can we improve the car/financial situation so that we all win?’ Or, ‘Is there anyway that I can be informed that you’ll be late so that we could make back-up plans?’

But the combative couple would probably respond with something inflammatory: ‘Couldn’t you at least get to a telephone?’ Or, ‘Here I am busting my butt to pay your bills and you complain ‘cause I’m a little late.’

The ASU programs try to teach parents to understand each other’s points of view and to respond much differently. According to Griffin, a father might be asked to imagine that he had a date with a beautiful woman whom he wanted to impress. What would he do then if his car conked out or if he needed to work late? How would that woman feel if she were late?

Similarly, a mother might be asked how she would respond if her best friend experienced car or financial troubles or was often late. Each parent is then encouraged to react in a similar manner to his or her children and ex-spouse.

“We try to keep the focus on the child,” Griffin explains. He provides sample reminders of how to maintain focus.

“Is your goal to make your ex-spouse’s life miserable, or is it to do what’s best for your child?”

“If you continue behaving like this it will hurt your child, so if you want what’s best for that child, stop it!”

Once one or both parents complete their training, both are brought back to make and analyze another interaction video. They continue doing so for nearly a year.

Reducing post-marital parental conflict also yields another important side effect. Doing so makes it easier for both parents to maintain healthy relationships with their children.

“Acking which parent is more important to children after a divorce is like asking which you’d rather give up, your heart or lungs. Both are absolutely essential to life and your well-being,” Braver explains. The same applies to one’s parents.

When divorce rates first began to skyrocket during the 1970s, many people assumed that with a strong mom, and financial support from dad, children of divorce would turn out just fine. Sanford Braver has been a professor and researcher at ASU for 27 years. The veteran psychologist says that evidence gathered from virtually every study conducted since the 1970s shows that divorced children have significantly more problems, early sexual activity and teen pregnancies, as well as lower education levels and living standards.

In modern America, one of every two marriages ends in divorce. More than 13 million kids—40 percent of American children—now grow up without a father at home. That number represents a 46 percent increase from 1970 years ago. That is one reason Braver has committed himself to working with noncustodial fathers in a program called Dads for Life.

During their research, both Braver and Griffin came to understand and appreciate the unique issues, difficulties, and barriers noncustodial fathers
face while parenting. There are other important needs for the program. In Arizona’s Maricopa County alone, fathers gain primary physical custody of their children in less than 10 percent of all divorces. Maricopa County includes Phoenix, Tempe, Mesa, Glendale, and Scottsdale. The county encompasses an area approximately the size of the entire state of Maryland, and includes more than 3 million residents.

“Unlike the Deadbeat Dad portrayals we hear so often on the news, we found that most divorced dads were desperate to stay involved,” Braver explains. “They were frustrated, felt screwed by the legal system, and were actually crying out for help.”

These fathers believed that they can no longer influence their children very much without seeing them each day, he continues.

“They missed the spontaneity; felt they were completely under their ex-wife’s thumb where visitation was concerned. Since their child support payments went directly to the courts, they couldn’t see the new ball glove, dance lessons, and other things that their children gained from that support.

“Dads for Life is about giving them hope,” Braver adds. “The program is about assuring fathers that they are in a position to impart what I call the “father goodies,” and that, in fact, it’s their responsibility to do so. They just have to parent differently. Our program gives them the tools and perspectives they need to do so consistently.”

Braver refers to things like the unique ways in which father’s discipline and motivate, training sons for manhood, helping daughters develop healthy male/female relations, and providing solid financial help. He reassures noncustodial dads that it is possible for them to provide those “goodies” by calling their kids each day, and by sending hand-made cards, letters, videos and e-mail. He also tells dads to keep assuring children that the kids are often in their thoughts and that “dad will always be there for them.”

“Marriages may fail, but fathers never should,” Braver adds.

Luckily, despite the large amount of publicity suggesting otherwise, Griffin and Braver maintain that statistics show that an overwhelming majority of marriages end “amicably,” with both parents admitting fault and focusing on the best interests of their children. They also estimate that 90 percent or more of all noncustodial parents stay involved with their children and pay their child support.

“Think about it. We take lessons that teach us how to drive or train for a career,” Griffin says. “Yet, the most costly thing we do in our lives to impact others and society is produce children. But our system still provides almost no mandatory training before marriage, conception, or divorce.”

Perhaps pre-training for the first two might someday help minimize the third.

The National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, National Science Foundation, and other agencies support research conducted at ASU’s Prevention Intervention Research Center. For more information, call 602.965.7420. Or visit via Internet: http://www.pirc.la.asu.edu/

Preventing Problems

Open since 1989, the ASU clinic offers low-cost, high-quality treatment to Maricopa County residents. Advanced graduate students supervised by ASU faculty members staff the clinic.

The clinic provides a variety of services, including counseling for individuals, couple and family problems, separation and divorce adjustment, remarriage and stepfamily adjustment, children’s behavior problems, sexual problems, and parenting and child discipline issues. The cost per session is determined by an individual’s ability to pay. Price usually ranges from $10 to $40 per visit. Treatment terms tend to be short—between six and 15 sessions.

ASU recently added a doctoral degree program in Marriage and Family Therapy to its curriculum, strengthening the university’s commitment to helping society better deal with rising divorce, child poverty, and domestic violence rates. Doctoral students and teachers from that program will staff the Marriage and Family Clinic.

The clinic is located in the Cowden Family Resources building on ASU’s Main Campus in Tempe. For more information, call 965-9373.

—LINDSEY MICHAELS
Divorce throws lives into disarray. Noncustodial dads can face serious post-marital challenges. But life is by no means a picnic for most divorced mothers who have full custody of the children. Expenses for divorced mothers tend to rise just as their incomes fall. Divorce often means that mothers must return to the labor force, take courses to enhance careers, and increase their paid work hours—all while simultaneously increasing their household and parenting duties.

Moms' days start before dawn with housework and a shower. She must wake, dress, and feed the kids by herself. The rest of her busy day might look like this:

- Take children to school.
- Rush to work to avoid being late.
- Struggle to finish work assignments before daycare closes.
- Pick up children from school or daycare.
- Start dinner. Inhale dinner.
- Clean the kitchen while bathtub is filling.
- Wash dirty kids and their hair.
- Blow dry hair and dress kids for bed.
- Help each child with homework.
- Tuck children into bed.

Then, and only then, can mom turn her attention toward paying bills, mending what's broken, washing dishes and clothes, or cleaning the house.

Of course, she would probably love to walk the dog or run errands while the kids sleep, but she cannot leave them home alone.

The routine continues, day after day after day, until her every-other-weekend-parenting-reprieve—when she can finally collapse and rest.

Sharlene Wolchik says that it is no wonder so many custodial moms report feeling like they are in “task overload” after divorce. Many women report feeling overwhelmed, angry, and depressed. Having young children, no extended family nearby, money problems, or significant conflict with the ex-spouse can intensify such feelings.

Wolchik is an ASU psychologist who studies such realities. She has designed a program that seems to help. Her handiwork is called “New Beginnings.” Wolchik’s program is incorporated into the “Dads For Life” program run by ASU colleagues Bill Griffin and Sanford Braver.

“Being an effective parent is a very, very large part of how women tend to define themselves,” Wolchik explains.

The more unhappy, unstable, and distant the kids, the less likely the custodial mom will function effectively. Likewise, the less functional the mom, the more unhappy, unstable, and distant the kids become.

The cycle perpetuates.

“New Beginnings targets custodial moms. The program begins by reassuring mothers that while some children do ‘sink’ after divorce, many ‘swim,’” Wolchik explains.

“The routine continues, day after day after day, until her every-other-weekend-parenting-reprieve—when she can finally collapse and rest.”

Wolchik’s program has other keystones. They address maintaining clear, consistent discipline, minimizing interparental conflict, and setting up appropriate contact with the noncustodial parent. Participants in New Beginnings are advised to consciously seek out things their kids do well. People under stress tend to perceive more negative issues. Likewise, participants are encouraged to make sure that their reaction to situations fits the “crime,” rather than falling prey to a stress-induced overreaction.

Anger management is a large part of the program. Moms learn how and when to put themselves in “time-out.” They also learn the necessity of and some skills for keeping children out of the “war zone.”

Irwin Sandler takes a slightly different approach to divorce studies. He works with kids, looking for coping skills that help children to help themselves.

“In many ways, moms are very heroic and selfless after divorce,” says Sandler, an ASU professor of psychology. “They must somehow deal with their own issues while simultaneously focusing nearly all of their time and energy on their children to get them through.”
Sandler's work helps moms by helping kids. “Divorce is just the beginning of the story for kids,” he says. “It triggers a change in family structure that leads to a whole cascade of continuing stressors that kids must constantly deal with.”

The stressors Sandler refers to include things like less parental contact, interparental conflict, relocation, standard of living, and parent-stress issues.

Sandler has interviewed hundreds of children of divorce, mostly between the ages of 8 and 10. He always asks the children to express what they were thinking, feeling, and worrying about when facing each issue. As a result, he’s learned a great deal about coping.

“Much of effective coping involves dealing with appraisals: what the child believes, how he frames the situation; and what he perceives is going on,” Sander explains.

The ASU psychologist’s work involves helping children identify and understand their feelings. For example, before divorce, kids can usually analyze problems at school or with friends, then take some type of direct action that improves things. The child studies harder and his grades improve; he learns to share and friends come back.

“With divorce, all the direct problem-solving skills kids have learned up to that point no longer work,” he continues. “They can’t stop the divorce, change their parents’ minds, or control their own destinies—no matter what they try. And that can be quite frustrating.”

According to Sandler, kids categorize divorce-related stressors into three main categories: threat to self; threat to others; and material loss.

Threat to self issues include feelings such as, “My parents don’t love me anymore. My parents are angry with me. I did something wrong.”

Threat to other issues include thoughts such as, “Someone I love is suffering. One of my parents has done something wrong.”

Material loss issues relate to what Sandler terms “decrease in fun”—things like fewer toys and trips, and moving to smaller quarters with shared bedrooms.

Having identified those stressors, Sandler was also able to recognize four main types of coping strategies: active coping; avoidance coping; abstraction; and support seeking. His research suggests that active coping often produces the most positive results, while avoidance coping does just the opposite.

“Active coping involves directly engaging the stressor and seeking out the positive,” he says. “You learn to identify your feelings, objectively gauge the situation, then take a course of action where you know you’ll be all right.”

With active coping, children recognize that while they can’t control parental choices, they can control the way they look at them. Regarding fighting between parents, a child might say, “Yes, mom and dad are fighting, but that’s just the way they are. No one gets hurt and they both still very much love me.”

Or, if dad misses several visits, the child might say, “It has something to do with dad, not me. I know dad loves me; he just can’t show it in all the ways I need him to.”

When using avoidance coping, a child tries to block out the problem and pretends that there is nothing wrong. Sander’s research suggests that this strategy often leads to high rates of depression and anxiety. He believes that may be because problems often fester around in the child’s subconscious mind, where they never get resolved.

Abstraction is the third coping strategy. Abstraction involves continuing to do things you like to do, such as playing video games, reading, and riding bikes. The strategy involves getting on with life—not dwelling on the negative. This strategy seems to be effective when combined with an active coping strategy.

Support seeking is the fourth strategy. Support seeking involves finding someone to listen, empathize, and validate. While support seeking can be beneficial, Sandler says that simply talking to someone doesn’t necessarily guarantee positive mental health outcomes.

Sandler says that the key is finding someone who helps you understand what you are feeling and that you are not alone. Support seeking becomes even better if that person can teach you coping skills just like someone had to teach you how to tie your shoes and how to talk.

If a child is coping effectively, he walks away from a situation feeling as if, “That worked. I handled it.” Sandler says, “The key is getting him to the point where he can say, ‘I didn’t like that. I may not like what’s ahead. But I know I can handle it.’”

In essence, that is the entire point of ASU’s divorce programs. “None of these are what I’d call traditional divorce recovery programs,” Wolchik explains. “Our programs are designed primarily to ensure that moms and dads are on the same page as far as meeting their kids’ needs are concerned.”

“Our biggest challenge is that divorce is in and of itself a classic Catch-22 scenario,” Sandler adds. Just when children need love, stability, and parental contact the most, divorce usually makes both parents significantly less available.

The National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, National Science Foundation, and other agencies support research conducted at ASU’s Prevention Intervention Research Center. For more information, call 602-965-7420. Or visit us online: http://pirc.la.asu.edu/