Raising children in a postdivorce family can be an especially demanding and complex task (Emery, 1988). Even though many of the most severe stresses associated with the divorce process are substantially attenuated within 2 years (Hetherington, 1989), parents and children in postdivorce families continue to face challenges related to coparental negotiations and conflict about childrearing and child support, as well as financial stresses, task overload, and relationship adjustment (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). How family members, especially divorced parents, cope with these challenges is likely to be affected by a number of risk and protective factors. One potential protective factor is social support, but there have been remarkably few studies of how and to what extent close family members, friends, and professionals facilitate or perhaps even hinder parents’ postdivorce adjustment.

Since epidemiological studies first revealed relationships between individuals’ physical and mental health and their embeddedness in a social network (e.g., Cobb, 1976), the definition and study of social support has undergone many changes. Initially, a number of researchers treated social support as a unitary construct, evaluating aspects that were easily assessed and quantified such as the size of an individual’s social network, frequency of contact with, and interconnection among network members (for a review, see Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Better predictors of mental health than network size and frequency of contact,
however, turned out to be individuals' perception of and satisfaction with their social network (e.g., Henderson, 1981; Sarason, Pierce, Bannerman, & Sarason, 1993). It is not so much the number of people available and how often they provide help that appears to matter as it is how potential and actual sources of help are perceived by the recipient.

A further refinement was the examination of the different forms of support that network members provide. Since Weiss (1974) articulated the distinct provisions of social relationships, four categories of social support have been repeatedly identified by researchers: emotional support, companionship, instrumental or tangible support, and informational support or advice (e.g., Cohen & Willis, 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). In addition, there has been growing evidence that specific forms of support may be perceived as differentially helpful depending on an individual's expertise or personal relationship with the support provider (Sarason et al., 1993). As the latter researchers claim about one of their own studies (p. 1082):

The results ... reinforce the view that it is not just the receipt of supportive behavior alone, but the supporter's positive view of the individual as expressed in the positive qualities of the relationship, that may be important in establishing, not only global perceptions of support, but support's beneficial effects.... In such situations, the characteristics of the relationship are important both in the support provided ... and in the way the support is interpreted by the recipient.

This statement links research on social support with the literature on attachment, as highlighted in the following statement by John Bowlby (1978):

Evidence is accumulating that human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person so trusted, also known as an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969), can be considered as providing his (or her) companion with a secure base from which to operate.... Looked at in this light healthy personality functioning at every age reflects, first, an individual's ability to recognize suitable figures willing and able to provide him with a secure base, and, second, his ability to collaborate with such figures in mutually rewarding relationships. (pp. 101, 104)

According to attachment theory, the perceived availability of trustworthy attachment figures enables individuals to better explore solutions for stressful situations or to avert such situations before they arise (see also Cobb, 1976). That is, perceived available support (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990) may lower the need for actual support because it potentiates an individual's coping ability. Moreover, when circumstances require actual support, secure attachment relationships are the context in which such support is most likely to be perceived as welcome and helpful. In the absence of a trusting relationship, some forms of support may have self-esteem lowering rather than enhancing effects (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990).

It is unclear, however, to what extent attachment theory is applicable to support from individuals such as friends, neighbors, coworkers, and professionals who do not strictly fit the definition of attachment figure. According to Weiss