Stability and Quality of Life Events and Psychological Symptomatology in Children of Divorce

Irwin Sandler, Sharlene Wolchik, Sanford Braver, and Bruce Fogas
Program for Prevention Research, Arizona State University

Studied the relations between postdivorce events and maladjustment of children of divorce using a two-dimensional model of events. One dimension concerned the stability of events and included whether they were increases, decreases, or the continuation of stable conditions. The second dimension was quality, and included whether they had a positive or negative valence. Two samples of children of divorce (ns = 142 and 64) ages 8-15 were studied. Children's overall maladjustment as reported by children and parents were the criterion variables. Scores were derived from a life events schedule for children of divorce to assess the occurrence and stability of positive and negative divorce-related events. The relations between event scores and maladjustment were different when children's self-reports and parent reports were used as criterion. In predicting children's self-reported maladjustment (a) stable positive events but not changes in positive events were related to lower maladjustment (b) increased negative events were related to higher maladjustment, and (c) change for the worse was related to higher maladjustment. In predicting parent reports of children's maladjustment, only the relations of the change for the worse score were replicated. Implications of the results for the design of preventive interventions and for the study of children in stressful situations are discussed.

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2All correspondence should be sent to Irwin Sandler, Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287-1104.
Parental divorce is a highly prevalent event which has an important impact on the lives of children. Glick (1988) has estimated that nearly 2% of American children experience parental divorce each year and that approximately 40% will experience the divorce of their parents before they reach 18 years of age. Researchers have found that parental divorce is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes including increased aggression problems (Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975), poorer academic achievement (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLoughlin, 1983), and poor self-concept (Parish & Wigle, 1985). However, it is also clear that the quality of the postdivorce environment is a critical determinant of children's adaptation (Felner, Terre, & Rowlison, 1988). For example, a better quality relationship between children and their custodial and noncustodial parents, and less interparental conflict have consistently been associated with better adjustment following divorce (e.g., Hess & Camara, 1979). The most important issue for research on the effects of divorce on children may be to identify those characteristics of the postdivorce environment that are associated with better or more problematic adjustment.

One useful framework for conceptualizing the quality of children's postdivorce environments is the transitional event model developed by Felner et al. (1988). The model conceptualizes divorce as a process involving multiple transactions that occur over time rather than as a single discrete event. Within this model, Felner et al. (1988) focus on the proximal daily events experienced by children and how children adapt to the challenges presented by these events. They have enumerated several domains in which these proximal events may occur, including interactions between the parents, relationships between the parent and children, and daily routines.

Several researchers have attempted to study the effects on children's adjustment of the environmental events that occurred following divorce. Stolberg and Anker (1983) used a 13-item scale to assess recent environmental changes and found that the total number of changes was positively related to children's adjustment problems. Kurdek and Blisk (1983) assessed the amount of life change occasioned by the divorce using an eight-item scale and reported that total environmental change was related to lower self-esteem but not to psychological symptomatology. Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, and Fogas (1986) developed a 62-item scale (the Divorce Event Schedule for Children, DESC) to assess a representative sample of events which children, parents, and experienced professionals reported as having an impact on children following parental divorce. Two groups of researchers have found that reports of undesirable events on the DESC were correlated with higher levels of children's maladjustment while the occurrence of positive events was not (Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 1988; Walsh & Stolberg, 1989).