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Associations Between Custody Arrangements and Parent-Child Involvement Following Divorce

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ABSTRACT. The present investigation examined the impact of custody arrangements on levels of parent-child involvement following divorce drawing upon data from the National Survey of Families and Households. Analyses using 186 custodial mothers and 31 custodial fathers indicated that differences in the number of days of custody that parents were awarded were not related to levels of parent-child involvement. In addition, both mothers and fathers were found to be equally involved with their sons and daughters following divorce. Possible explanations for these findings as well as policy and clinical implications are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

KEYWORDS. Parent-child relations, divorce, custody arrangements

Divorce may change the relationship between parents and children, but it does not end it. Psychological ties continue to connect all family members even in the years following divorce (Hess & Camara, 1979). Increasingly, parents who divorce maintain contact with their children

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after moving into separate households (Seltzer, 1990). With the increasing popularity of joint custody, parent-child relationships are no longer limited to the parent with whom children live. Children's development is influenced by the type of interaction that they have with both parents as well as the type of household in which they live. However, most research studies continue to treat the type of household that children live in as the only predictor of child well-being, rather than carefully examining the effects of family interaction (Seltzer, 1990). In addition to considering which parent has been awarded custody of a child, it is also important to consider the relation between child custody and the amount of parent-child involvement. Very little information is available on the possible effects that differing amounts of custody have on the relationship between parents and their children. For example, two mothers can be granted sole custody of their child, but the specific legal agreements regarding the number of potential hours each parent may spend with their child may be different. It is this differing amount of custody, rather than the classification of type of custody, that may have important implications for the quality of parent-child relationships.

In order to understand some of the changes that occur in families following divorce, research on parent-child relationships in father custody families will be reviewed. Then, previous research on parent-child relationships in mother custody families will be discussed. In each type of family, the impact of children's gender on parent-child involvement will be noted. Next, pertinent research on the influence of time elapsed since divorce and the children's age at divorce on parent-child involvement will be reviewed. Finally, the focus and hypotheses of the present investigation will be introduced.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN FATHER SOLE AND JOINT CUSTODY FAMILIES

Studies of parent-child involvement in families with sole and joint custody fathers have suggested that most custodial fathers are capable of establishing close relationships with their children. For example, fathers with sole custody have been found to spend more time in activities such as playing, talking, or reading with their children than fathers from intact families (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996). Increased paternal involvement with children following divorce is much more

likely when fathers care for their children's needs on a daily basis (Lowery & Settle, 1985). This suggests that father-child involvement is more likely to be maintained following divorce when fathers incorporate time with their children into their day-to-day activities (Hess & Camara, 1979). Fathers with joint custody report greater closeness with and greater influence on their children than noncustodial fathers (Greif, 1979). This suggests that joint custody seems to be more conducive to father-child interaction than only father-child visitation. As demonstrated by Arditti (1992), joint custody fathers were more likely than fathers with visitation rights to be highly involved with their children. Furthermore, this level of father-child involvement appeared to endure over time. When fathers with joint custody were evaluated one year following divorce, they reported that they were more involved with their children than noncustodial fathers (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985).

Moderating effects of child gender in father-custody families. Although custodial fathers have been observed to spend more time participating in activities with their children than fathers in intact families, the amount of involvement has been found to differ based on the gender of the child. Specifically, fathers with only girls or both girls and boys were less likely than fathers of only boys to take part in activities with their children (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996). Furthermore, boys in father-custody families were found to have a better relationship with their father and a poorer relationship with their nonresidential mother than girls in father-custody (Peterson & Zill, 1986). Studies with adolescent girls have revealed that girls whose residence alternated between their joint custodial father and mother felt closer to their father than girls who lived primarily with their father (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). This reduced level of interaction between custodial fathers and daughters may help explain why girls tend to do better when living with their mother than with their father. For example, mother-resident girls generally have higher grades and levels of psychological adjustment when compared to father-resident girls (Maccoby et al., 1993).

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN MOTHER SOLE AND JOINT CUSTODY FAMILIES

Although fathers are seeking custody of their children in greater numbers, mothers are still awarded custody much more often. Typical-

ly, divorce decrees specify that mothers have physical custody of a family's children, whereas fathers are awarded a certain number of days of visitation (Seltzer, 1991). Studies on maternal custody families suggest that the mother-child relationship is initially negatively affected by the trauma of divorce, but then stabilizes over time. For example, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) observed that one year following divorce, mother-child relationships were characterized by a lack of closeness. However, five years after divorce, many mothers were able to reestablish a satisfying relationship. Many of the initial difficulties in the mother-child relationship following a divorce may be due to the new role that custodial mothers must assume and the problems associated with parenting, discipline of children, and social stresses of being a single person (Fine, Moreland, & Schwebel, 1983).

Furthermore, children of divorce report greater attachment to custodial divorced mothers and approximately equal attachment to custodial fathers in comparison to intact families (White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985). When custodial mothers were compared to mothers in intact families, the two groups did not differ in their descriptions of the amount of enjoyment they had with the child or how satisfied they were with the relationship (Hodges, Buchsbaum, & Tierney, 1983). In addition, custodial mothers and mothers in intact families did not differ in terms of the frequency of undivided attention they gave to their children each week.

Moderating effects of child gender in mother-custody families. Research with custodial mothers, like that with custodial fathers, indicates that gender differences exist in mother-child interaction. Custodial mothers generally interact more positively with their daughters than with their sons. For example, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979) examined mother-child relationships for boys and girls at two months, one year, and two years following divorce. Custodial mothers exhibited fewer positive behaviors and more negative behaviors with their sons compared to their daughters. Mother-custody girls also showed significantly greater social competence, maturity, cooperativeness, and self-esteem than mother-custody boys (Kelly, 1993). However, both boys and girls who live with their custodial mother are more likely to have a better relationship with their mother than with their noncustodial father (Peterson & Zill, 1986).

TIME ELAPSED SINCE DIVORCE

Many changes occur in the lives of family members in the years following parental divorce. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1976) reported that both custodial mother-child and noncustodial father-child interactions improved over a two year period. At two years following divorce, mothers communicated more effectively, were more nurturant, and were better able to control their children than they were the year before. A similar pattern emerged for divorced fathers over the two year period. However, after this initial period, fathers tended to become less nurturant and more detached from their children. As mentioned previously, studies on maternal-custody families suggest that the quality of the mother-child relationship improves as the time since the divorce increases (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In this investigation, five years after divorce, many mothers had been able to reestablish a satisfying relationship with their children. In contrast, Hodges, Buchsbaum, and Tierney (1983) examined mother-child relationships following divorce and observed that newly separated mothers were more satisfied with their relationship with their children than mothers who had been separated from their spouse for a greater length of time. Furthermore, children living in mother-custody households experienced a continual decline in visitation with their noncustodial father as time progressed (Maccoby et al., 1993). A different situation emerged for children in father custody homes. These children increased visitation with their noncustodial mother over the three year period of the study.

AGE OF CHILD AT DIVORCE

Another important variable to consider when studying parent-child relationships in divorced families is the age of children when the divorce occurred. Booth and Amato (1994) observed that children's age at parental divorce was significantly and positively associated with closeness to fathers for girls but not for boys. Children's age at divorce was unrelated to closeness to mothers for both boys and girls. In other words, children's age at parental divorce was associated with more recent contact with fathers among boys but not among girls. This implies that when parental divorce occurs when children are young, it is relatively more disruptive to father-child relations in later life.

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

The present study examined the relation between the number of days of child custody that were awarded to each parent following divorce and the amount of involvement that parents shared with their children. Mothers with differing amounts of child custody were compared with regard to their levels of parent-child involvement. Similarly, fathers with differing amounts of custody were compared with respect to their amounts of parent-child involvement. The moderated and direct associations between the child's gender, the child's age at divorce, and the time elapsed since divorce and levels of parent-child involvement for both mothers and fathers were also determined.

It was hypothesized that levels of parent-child involvement would not be associated with the number of days of custody parents have been awarded. In addition, it was hypothesized that parents would be more involved with same-gendered children than with children of the opposite gender. Finally, it was hypothesized that recently divorced parents would be more involved with their children than parents who had been divorced for a longer period of time, and that parents would be more involved with younger children than older children.

METHOD

Data and Participants

This study used data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which contains nationally representative data on a cross-section of 13,017 adults aged 19 years and older living in the United States in 1987-1988. In the NSFH, one adult in each household was randomly selected to be the primary respondent. One child under the age of 19 years was also randomly selected from all children present in the household as the focal child. Respondents were selected for the current study if they fulfilled the requirements of having a prior history of divorce, the presence of a child between the ages of 5 and 18 years old, and if they were at least 24 years of age. Only respondents over the age of 24 years were chosen to minimize data on those individuals who became parents during their teenage years. Parents were included only if they answered questions

about a biological child born after the date of their first marriage and if the marriage had terminated before the date of the interview. This selection process yielded an initial subsample of 730 respondents. Of these 730 respondents, 506 respondents (442 women, 64 men) answered questions about a child living in their home at the time of interview. It is interesting to note that for mothers who classified their child as a resident of their household, the days per month of custody that they were awarded ranged from 0 to 30. For fathers who identified the focal child as a resident of their household, the days of custody that they were awarded ranged from 15 to 30 days. This suggests that some children were living in the care of their mothers even though the custody agreement had stipulated that the mothers be awarded only a few days of custody per month. Because the present study examined the relation between legal custody and parent-child interaction, it was the nature of the custody agreement and rather than *de facto* custody that was assessed. Of these 506 divorced parents, 422 mothers and 48 fathers reported that the focal child lived in their homes all the time. The overwhelmingly greater proportion of mothers with sole custody in the present sample is similar to results found in previous custody studies (e.g., Seltzer, 1994). Of the 506 parents who had the focal child in their homes, only 223 mothers and 33 fathers answered the specific question about the nature of their custody agreement and comprised the subsample used in subsequent analyses. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for participants.

Variables

The variables used to statistically predict levels of parental involvement were the number of days of custody that the parent was awarded, child's age at divorce, child's gender, and the time between the first divorce and the interview date (i.e., time elapsed since divorce). The custody arrangement of the focal child was assessed by asking the divorced respondent the question, "How many days a month is the child supposed to spend with the other parent?" It was assumed that all of the focal child's remaining time was spent in the custody of the respondent.

Parent-child involvement was assessed by the following eight questions: "How often last week did you eat breakfast with your child?"; "How often last week did you eat dinner with your child?"; "How

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Demographic and Study Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender of respondent				
Male	72	13.9		
Female	447	86.1		
Gender of child				
Male	381	52.2		
Female	342	46.5		
Race of family				
African American	120	16.4		
Caucasian	558	76.4		
Hispanic American	44	6.0		
Native American	5	0.7		
Asian American	1	0.1		
Household income (in dollars)	621		30,462.45	37,6747.25
Age of custodial child (in years)	730		11.88	4.28
Age of respondent (in years)				
Mothers	586		36.13	6.16
Fathers	55		37.93	6.30
Total sample	730		36.40	6.15
Age of child at divorce (in years)	730		6.09	4.04
Time since divorce (in years)	730		6.36	4.34
Days/months of custody				
Mothers with residential child	223	25.20	3.92	
Fathers with residential child	33	24.61	4.11	
Involvement index				
Mothers with residential child		32.48	7.47	
Fathers with residential child		30.95	7.40	

much time last week did you spend with your child on activities away from home?"; "How much time last week did you spend helping your child with reading?"; "How much time last week did you spend working on a project with your child?"; "How much time last week did you spend having private talks with your child?"; "How many times last week did you praise your child?"; and "How often last week did you hug your child?" Although many other activities may constitute parent-child involvement, these variables were the ones utilized in the NSFH, and thus were employed in the present study. Response options for these questions were: *never/rarely* (1); *once a month or less* (2); *several times a month* (3); *once a week* (4); *several times a week* (5); and *almost everyday* (6). A parent-child involvement score was calculated by adding the values for each of these questions. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .77.

RESULTS

Correlations among the variables predicting mothers' and fathers' involvement with their residential children are presented in Table 2. A significant negative correlation emerged between the duration of time that elapsed since the divorce and the age of the child at divorce for both custodial mothers and fathers. This implies that couples who were divorced many years ago did so when their children were relatively younger than couples who have divorced more recently. For custodial mothers, a significant positive correlation was observed between the time that had passed since the divorce and the number of days of custody that the mother had been awarded. That is, mothers who divorced many years ago were more likely to receive more days of custody per month than recently divorced mothers. Parent-child involvement was significantly negatively correlated with the time elapsed since divorce and the child's age at divorce for mothers, but not for fathers. This suggests that newly divorced mothers of younger children were most likely to be highly involved with their children. For both custodial fathers and mothers, days of custody was not significantly correlated with amount of parent-child involvement.

A direct entry multiple regression was performed to identify the relative importance of days of custody that mothers were awarded, the child's age at the time of divorce, time since the divorce, and the child's gender in statistically predicting active parent-child involvement. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis for mothers who answered all questions about a child in their household ($n = 186$).

TABLE 2. Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Time since divorce	—	-.59**	-.06	.19**	-.27**
2. Child's age at divorce	-.63**	—	-.06	-.03	-.10*
3. Gender of child	-.13	-.03	—	.02	.03
4. Days/months of custody	-.07	.31	-.13	—	-.11
5. Parent-child involvement	-.06	-.16	.09	.04	—

Note. Coefficients above the diagonal reflect correlations for custodial mothers ($n = 218$). Coefficients below the diagonal reflect correlations for custodial fathers ($n = 31$).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

TABLE 3. Summary of Regression Analysis for Custodial Mothers

Variable	B	SE B	β
Days of custody	-.02	.01	-.08
Child's age at divorce	-.11	.02	-.41**
Child's gender	-.01	.13	.00
Time since divorce	-.09	.02	-.39**

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Overall, the predictor variables as a set were significantly related to the amount of involvement that custodial mothers had with their children, $F(4, 182) = 7.98, p < .01$. Days of awarded custody, the child's age at the time of divorce, time elapsed since the divorce, and the child's gender collectively predicted 15% (13% adjusted) of the variance associated with mother-child involvement. When each predictor variable was individually examined, the time elapsed since divorce and the child's age at divorce had significant associations with levels of mother-child involvement. That is, custodial mothers were more likely to be highly involved with younger children and when less time had elapsed since the divorce when the influence of other variables is controlled.

To assess the hypothesized moderated relations, three interaction terms were created (Days of custody \times Child's gender, Days of custody \times Child's age, Days of custody \times Time since divorce). The inclusion of the interaction terms into the regression model did not account for any additional variance compared with the model that did not include the interaction terms, Adjusted R square = .12, $F(6, 180) = 5.37, p < .01$. This indicated a lack of significant moderated influences on mother-child involvement. Because of multicollinearity, the significance level of each predictor variable was artificially deflated and could not be accurately interpreted.

Because of power limitations created by the small number of custodial fathers in the present study, a multiple regression analysis could not be performed. To compare fathers who had greater amounts of custody with those fathers who had fewer days of custody, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. Those fathers whose days per month of custody ranged from 15 to 30 were divided into two groups falling above and below the median value. The first group, labeled *infrequent custody* ($n = 11$), were those fathers in whose custo-

dy the child lived for 15 to 25 days each month. The *frequent custody group* ($n = 20$) consisted of those fathers in whose custody the child lived for 25.6 to 30 days each month. The ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in the involvement levels between these two groups, $F(1, 27) = 1.27, ns$.

DISCUSSION

Involvement of Custodial Mothers

The implications of the above findings will be first discussed for custodial mothers. A significant relation was not observed between the days of awarded custody and levels of parent-child involvement. This supports our hypothesis that the days of custody that mothers were awarded are not associated with the amount of involvement they have with their children. This finding suggests that the actual quantity of interaction between custodial mothers and their children is not necessarily compromised by a decrease in the amount of custody mothers have been awarded.

A significant relation was not observed between the gender of the child and the amount of active involvement that mothers shared with their children. This finding differs from those of several previous studies that suggested that custodial mothers interact more positively with girls than with boys (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979). Thus, the hypothesis that custodial mothers would be more involved with their daughters than with their sons was not supported. Because the Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979) investigation was conducted two decades ago, it may also be possible that social norms are shifting and the mothers in the present investigation were relatively more willing to participate in traditionally male activities with their sons, which may equalize levels of mother-child involvement across child gender. Further research on the impact of gender on parent-child relationships following divorce is needed to determine the likelihood of this hypothesis.

A significant negative relation was observed between the time that had elapsed since divorce and the amount of involvement mothers had with their children. Newly divorced mothers spent more time with their children than mothers who were divorced many years ago. Pre-

vious studies in this area have found that the quality of the mother-child relationship improves as the time since divorce increases (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, a decline in the amount of involvement between custodial mothers and children does not necessarily indicate a decline in the relationship quality. As time passes, children become more autonomous and less insecure about their relationship with their parents following the divorce, and thus may require less time in activities with their mothers. Alternatively, a decline in mother-child involvement following divorce could also be indicative of increased distance in the relationship as time passes. This may be due to the high degree of disruption that occurs in the lives of many mothers following divorce. Single-parenthood may require mothers to increase employment responsibilities, making it increasingly more difficult to maintain the level of involvement that they may have had with their children in their newly divorced years. Thus, the hypothesis that parent-child involvement decreases as more time elapses since divorce was supported for custodial mothers. However, further examination is required to determine the manner in which this reduced involvement impacts mother-child relationship quality.

There was also a significant negative relation between the age of the child at the divorce and amount of current mother-child involvement. This supports our hypothesis that custodial mothers are more involved with younger children than older children. Greater lengths of time that older children experience in intact families prior to the divorce may allow them to develop a good relationship with both parents. Thus, after the divorce, it may be that older children are more likely to continue their relationship with their noncustodial fathers and may have less time available to spend in activities with custodial mothers. Other researchers have observed that children who were older at the time of divorce enjoyed more contact with their noncustodial fathers than younger children (Booth & Amato, 1994). In addition, because younger children experience greater social and emotional problems than older children following divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989), mothers may feel the need to be more involved with their younger children to help them cope.

Involvement of Custodial Fathers

Consistent with our hypotheses, no significant relation was observed between the days of custody that fathers were awarded and

levels of father-child involvement. Fathers who were allowed only 15 to 25 days of custody each month were as involved with their children as those fathers who had been awarded 25 to 30 days each month. This may be because fathers with fewer days of custody planned more activities into the time they had to spend with their children because they wanted to maximize the quality of this limited interaction. Similar to the results for custodial mothers, no relation was observed between the gender of the child and father-child interaction. However, unlike the results for mothers, a significant relation was not observed between the time elapsed since divorce or the child's age at divorce and father-child involvement. This may indicate that fathers' lives may be less disrupted by divorce and they may be able to maintain the same level of involvement with their children as the time since divorce increases. It has been previously mentioned that very few fathers are awarded custody of young children. Thus, the lack of a significant relation between the age of the child at divorce and father-child involvement may have occurred because most children in the father-custody were older at the time of divorce. However, the results of fathers must be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size of custodial fathers in this study. Also, it may be that the small group of fathers who chose to answer questions regarding the custody arrangement of their children represented a more concerned group of fathers than the larger population. Their increased knowledge regarding the nature of the custody arrangement may be associated with a greater concern to be involved with their children.

Limitations of Present Findings

Although the utilization of a nationally representative data set allowed for a diverse sample, it also created certain limitations in the present study. For example, it was difficult to acquire an adequate picture of fathers' involvement because of the small number of divorced fathers who chose to answer questions about custody. Because the subsample size was small, one cannot be certain of the generalizability of the present findings to the population of custodial fathers.

Another limitation of the NSFH data set was the inability to cross-reference the responses of the two parents of each child. This made it impossible to verify the accuracy of responses by comparing them with the opinions of the matched noncustodial parent.

Furthermore, this study did not account for the current marital status of divorced parents. That is, children who were currently living in stepfamilies were not differentiated from those in single-parent homes. Previous studies have observed that children from newly remarried families experience more problems than those who live in stabilized, divorced, or one-parent households (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Such problematic behavior may play a role in the amount of interaction parents have with their children. Also, if children are highly involved with stepfamily members, there may be little time or desire left for children to spend with their noncustodial parents.

Another possible limitation was the confounding influence of children's developmentally appropriate individuation from their parents. As children become older and more autonomous, they may desire less help with their homework or may want to spend time with friends rather than regularly eating meals with their parents. This process may have been a factor that contributed to the relatively lower levels of custodial mothers' involvement with older children.

Finally, because the current investigation examined legal custody rather than the actual number of days that children spend with each parent, it cannot be certain if the days of custody variable was an accurate representation of the child's actual time with each parent.

Custody and Clinical Implications

The lack of a significant relation between the children's gender and the amount of involvement may have important implications for future child custody decisions. If mothers and fathers display equal levels of parental involvement regardless of the child's gender, there is no support for the bias of placing children in the custody of the same-gendered parent. However, because other researchers have observed significant gender differences in parent-child relationships following divorce, additional research or a meta-analysis is needed to reconcile these conflictual findings.

The lack of a significant relation between the days of awarded custody and the amount of parent-child involvement also may have implications for child custody litigation. Custodial parents may have reason to feel that they are able to maintain a healthy level of involvement with their children while sharing them with noncustodial parents for a substantial number of days each month. Thus, custodial parents may be less likely to refuse noncustodial parents' requests for greater

custody. If parents feel that they can maintain adequate relationships with their children, regardless of the custody agreement, they may be more willing to cooperate. This increased level of cooperation may carry over to the custody agreement, and encourage parents to decide on a suitable custody arrangement in a cooperative manner rather than requiring a court order.

Finally, the results of this investigation suggest that during divorce mediation, psychologists should dissuade parents from focusing on the number of days of custody they are awarded. Instead, therapists should focus on helping parents develop ways in which they can manage their time so that they are able to maintain a continuous level of interaction with their children following divorce. Cooperation between ex-spouses regarding parenting arrangements may facilitate reasonable access to their children for both parents (Ehrenberg, 1996). Thus, ex-spouses may enhance children's relationships with both parents by cooperating. Decreased conflict surrounding custody issues may help remove children from the focus of the parental conflict. This may be beneficial to their well-being, as children who are involved in their parents' disputes often feel conflicting loyalties (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbush, 1991) and experience more behavior problems (Bray & Hetherington, 1993). It may be that when limited custody does not threaten parent-child relationship, parents can focus on finding healthy ways to cope with the divorce and maintain the quality of their involvement.

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Waiting Until They Leave Home: The Experiences of Young Adults Whose Parents Separate

Jan Pryor

ABSTRACT. This study examines the experiences of young adults whose parents separated when they were 18 years or older, and uses the conceptual framework of Family Social Capital for interpretation. Family support, parent-child relationships, family fragility, inverted parenting, and kin keeping were significant factors for this group. They reported low levels of support, a sense throughout childhood of family vulnerability, and demands for parenting parents and kin keeping after their parents separated. Father-son relationships often improved after parental separation. The chronicity of family unhappiness for this group is compared with the experiences of offspring whose parents separated when they were children. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

KEYWORDS. Mid-life divorce, adult children, social capital

INTRODUCTION

The body of research which addresses the wellbeing of children after parental separation is considerable, and has moved from a focus

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The study was supported by a grant from the Auckland University Research Committee.