Instead of focusing on the problems associated with divorce, this chapter delineates a strengths-based model of the relations among divorce policies, mediating factors, and children's outcomes. Little research has linked specific divorce policies to child well-being following divorce. Based on an extensive review of the literature, several factors—such as children's positive coping skills, low parental conflict, high warmth and consistency of the parents, and the quality of the contact with the noncustodial parent—appear to mediate the effects of divorce. The chapter illustrates that policies that are designed to influence these mediators to maximize strengths and minimize risks will lead to the most positive child outcomes and concludes with a public health model for integrating research and policy.

* * *

The divorce or marital separation of their parents is one of the most common potentially adverse conditions that children in America experience today. Currently, over 40% of children are expected to live in a di-

This research was supported by National Institute of Mental Health grant P30 MH439246-16.

1A related adverse circumstance is nonmarital childbirth, which is almost as common (35.8% versus 37.0% of children living in divorced homes; Bureau of the Census, 1996) and perhaps even more toxic. This chapter is confined to children whose parents were once legally married and subsequently experienced divorce.
vorced home before the age of 16 (Cherlin, 1992), more than double the proportion 30 years ago (Shiono & Quinn, 1994). As divorce has become such a normative transition for children, a substantial literature examining the effects of divorce on children's well-being has accumulated.

Using meta-analysis to quantitatively summarize the findings of nearly 100 empirical studies that compared the well-being of children from divorced and nondivorced homes, Amato and Keith (1991a) concluded that children who experience marital dissolution are significantly more likely to exhibit a variety of behavioral, internalizing (i.e., depression, anxiety), social, and academic problems. Although negative effects on well-being are found for children ranging in age from preschool to college age (Amato & Keith, 1991a), the manifestation of adjustment problems differs depending on a child's age or developmental level. Wallerstein (1983) delineated patterns of postdivorce reactions from four age groups: preschool, early school-age (6 to 8 years), older school-age (9 to 12 years), and adolescents. Fear of parental abandonment, self-blame for the divorce, and feelings of rejection were found most frequently among the youngest groups and reactions of grief, anxiety, and aggressive behavior following divorce were common. Older children reported more feelings of anger toward parents, academic problems, and changes in peer and social relationships.

Some of the negative outcomes found in children from divorced homes can be accounted for by the fact that many children in families that eventually divorce are already showing maladjustment years prior to marital disruption, calling into question whether the adversity the children are dealing with is actually the divorce per se (e.g., Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). However, divorce has been shown to contribute to the risk of maladjustment (e.g., Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). Moreover, as children of divorce mature, the consequences carry heavier personal and societal costs. Adolescents from divorced homes are at elevated risk for dropping out of high school, becoming pregnant, and abusing substances (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Disruptions to healthy development during adolescence, in turn, predict psychological maladjustment in young adulthood (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995). Meta-analytic findings comparing young adults from divorced and married-parent homes show that the former exhibit more depression; have lower levels of marital quality, physical health, and life satisfaction; and achieve lower levels of educational, financial, and occupational status (Amato & Keith, 1991b).

The findings reviewed thus far focus on the problems and deficiencies of children from divorced homes as compared to children in married-parent families: a deficits model. The aim of this chapter is to develop an alternative, strengths-based, approach. Such a perspective, in contrast, focuses on positive outcomes and resiliencies in children in adverse circumstances. A much narrower empirical literature has investigated such competencies and strengths among children of divorce as compared to their peers. Findings
have focused on enhanced maturity (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980), increased self-esteem if the child has coped effectively (e.g., Slater, Stewart, & Linn, 1983), and enhanced empathy and perspective taking (Hetherington, 1998).

Another aspect of the literature, however, provides even stronger support for a strengths-based approach: the very high degree of variability found in responses of children and families to divorce. Although some children of divorce experience serious and ongoing problems, many appear to show no deficits whatsoever relative to their peers from married-parent households (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b). The diversity of responses is vast, suggesting that the resources children have available to them to cope with marital dissolution condition the outcome. Fortunately, a rather voluminous literature has investigated various features of the children, their parents, and the environment in which they function that correlate with their postdivorce adaptation. The focus of a strengths-based approach in evaluating this literature is to identify resources that enhance children’s resilience in dealing with the stress of their parents’ divorce, especially factors that can be facilitated by public policies. We conclude the chapter with a proposal for a public health model, a comprehensive perspective with which to view and tie together strengths-building policy. First, however, we address the issue of the legal context of divorce and the definition of the “child’s best interests.”

THE LEGAL CONTEXT SURROUNDING DIVORCE AND DEFINITION OF “CHILD’S BEST INTERESTS”

Perhaps more than almost any of the other adversities chronicled in this volume, the process of divorce occurs virtually entirely within the context of the legal system; thus, many of the policies to be considered are explicitly legal policies. Existing statutes and case law or court, government, and legal policies concern almost every aspect of divorce, including custody, visitation or “access,” child support, and so forth, as well as the circumstances under which a divorce can even be obtained at all.

It is important to note that the standard modern policymakers almost invariably adopt for existing child-relevant divorce policies is whether they promote the “child’s best interests,” rather than parental rights, justice for the parents, or other standards. Thus, policymakers already appear to implicitly weigh policies against their inevitable impact on the child’s adjustment. However, this standard is only vaguely defined in the legal literature, and judges are desirably permitted considerable leeway. To avoid this definitional vagueness, the focus here will be on empirically investigated indicators of both child maladjustment, such as children’s mental health problems, and developmental competence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), such as indicators of success in developmental tasks like school or employment. We thus
operationally define the child's **best interests** as positive outcomes on any of these measures, a far narrower definition than that of the law.\(^2\)

The conceptual model we use to summarize the literature is displayed in Figure 4.1. As noted, we propose that policies will have an impact on child outcomes by altering various “mediating factors.” The child outcome variables we consider (those that have been empirically studied) are in the bottom box in Figure 4.1.

The top box indicates the various substantive domains about which policy making related to divorce has taken place. The most obvious and far-reaching domains concern parent-child contact issues, including custody, both legal (i.e., decision-making authority regarding issues such as schooling, medical care, and religion for the child) and physical (i.e., where the child primarily lives), and the access or visitation schedule between the child and the nonresidential parent. A relatively new but hotly debated issue (Warshak, 2000) concerns the ability of a parent to relocate at will with the child away from the other parent. Next in prominence are the financial issues: child support amount and collection policies, as well as remaining financial matters (such as who pays for the child’s medical and dental needs, child care, and college expenses), alimony, and division of assets and debts. Another policy issue, which will not be discussed here, concerns the parents’ ease or difficulty in obtaining a legal divorce in the first place (the grounds for divorce, no fault).

The remaining areas of policy debate concern the process of dissolution. Currently an ever-growing menu of dispute resolution procedures is being offered as an alternative or supplement to traditional litigation or legal practice. One of the oldest of these is mediation, in which a trained neutral third party attempts to help couples arrive at a mutually acceptable compromise.

A more recent but very fast growing program is to offer, or even require, divorcing parents to participate in a short education program (usually about 4 hours) that instructs them on how to minimize the detrimental effects of the divorce on their children (Braver, Salem, Pearson, & DeLuse, 1996; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). Such programs typically attempt to teach parenting skills, the value of shielding the child from parental conflict, and the importance of emotional and financial support from both parents. Two relatively new options feature expanded use of mental health professionals. Custody evaluations (e.g., Ackerman, 1995) allow such experts to make nonbinding recommendations to the parties and the court concerning custody and access

\(^2\)Even though the child’s interests should remain the most important consideration, both the decision-making process and the substantive rules must also take into account other values, such as fairness to the parents and privacy interests. This chapter does not discuss how such concerns should be weighed when considering measures that would advance the child’s interests, although such fundamental policy choices are important in fashioning the law. We consider only the more circumscribed mission of describing how the child’s strengths and interests, narrowly defined, might be advanced and built on by changes in legal policy.
Policy Areas

Parent Contact Issues
  Custody: Physical and legal
  Visitation and access
  Relocation

Financial Issues
  Child support
  Other financial issues

Bases for Divorce

Divorce and Dispute Resolution Procedures
  Traditional legal practice
  Mediation
  Divorcing parent education
  Custody evaluators or Special Masters
  Psychological intervention programs
  Comprehensive public health model

Mediators

Interparental conflict vs. coparenting
Quality of custodial parent–child bond
Parenting capability of custodial parent
Quality of relationship with noncustodial parent
Frequency of contact with noncustodial parent
Parenting capability of noncustodial parent
Child coping processes
Environmental stability
Economic decline

Child Outcomes

Problems
  Internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression)
  Externalizing or antisocial behavior
  Delinquency
  Substance abuse
  Teenage pregnancy

Competencies
  Self-esteem
  Efficacy
  Social skills and good peer relations
  Educational attainment and competencies
  Employment status as adult

Figure 4.1. Conceptual model linking policy substantive domains, mediating factors, and child outcome variables.
after full psychological evaluation of the family. Although in the recent past each side could hire their own expert to “duel it out,” current guidelines from the American Psychological Association (1994) discourage that practice, preferring instead only one evaluator, appointed by the court, whose code of ethics requires giving fair consideration to each side.

An even newer role for mental health professionals, in place in at least three states, is that of Special Master (also called Family Court Masters or Advisors or Family Coordinators), an ongoing advisor to the family appointed by the court. Such a professional consults with them on emerging parenting disputes and makes nonbinding recommendations after nonconfidential fact-finding.

Additionally, a number of longer (e.g., several weeks) psychological interventions have been designed and evaluated. Some of these, designed for children, are group therapy-like programs conducted in schools. Others, such as psychoeducational programs directed at parents, teach parenting, communication, and conflict resolution skills to enhance functioning in the postdivorce family (Braver, Griffin, Cookston, Sandler, & Williams, in press; Wolchik et al., 2002).

RESEARCH LINKING POLICIES TO CHILDREN’S OUTCOMES

There is surprisingly little research that directly links the majority of policy areas in the top box of Figure 4.1 to children’s outcomes in the bottom box. For example, despite policy making based on the assumption that more and better child support payments result in better outcomes for children, there is little evidence supporting the assumption (e.g., McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thompson, 1994). A similar paucity of research applies to policies concerning visitation and access, relocation, all financial policies, and custody evaluators or Special Masters.

A comparatively greater number of studies purport to compare the impact of various custody arrangements on children’s adjustment. For example, a meta-analysis of 31 empirical evaluations comparing joint to maternal physical custody (Bauerman, 2002) found that the preponderance of these findings clearly favor joint custody. However, most of the research on custody, as well as on child support, faces the severe difficulty of drawing clear conclusions from correlational data. For example, although McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that higher child support payments were associated with better outcomes for children, substantial doubt remains about the causal direction: Is more child support actually the cause of the better child outcomes? Or, for example, do better-adjusted children elicit higher payments as a more worthwhile “investment”? Or families with less interparental conflict might both pay more child support and have better adjusted children. Analogous arguments can be made to question most of the custody findings. As a result, firm conclusions about the impact of the policies are rarely warranted from any extant data.
Two policies have been evaluated much more conclusively in randomized experiments instead of or in addition to purely correlational studies. First, many of the longer psychological intervention programs for children and parents have been shown effective in improving children’s outcomes. In addition, mediation has been found to be effective in reducing court hearings (e.g., Pearson & Thoennes, 1984) and increasing parental satisfaction with the divorce process (Emery, Matthews, & Wyer, 1991), although it has not been found to improve children’s mental health (Emery, 1994).

Additionally, a few of the policy issues have been studied using quasi-experimental methods. For example, legal (not physical) custody was evaluated using sophisticated statistical modeling techniques that ruled out most other interpretations, leaving the conclusion that joint legal custody typically does lead to better adjusted children than sole maternal legal custody (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001).

Mediating Factors

In the absence of evidence directly linking policies to child outcomes, in the next section we focus instead on a number of the factors that have been well researched in connection to child outcomes. The bulk of the literature on children and divorce has related child outcomes to mediating factors (see middle box in Figure 4.1). These mediating factors represent the resources children have available to them as they navigate the divorce process and include the quality of family relationships (i.e., parents’ relationships with each other and with their children), the children’s own intrapersonal strengths and coping skills, environmental stability, and economic matters. The review of these resources is organized in roughly the order that research has most reliably related the factor to positive child outcomes.

Interparental Relationship

Interparental conflict has consistently been identified as perhaps the most detrimental aspect of divorce for children’s well-being, being related to behavioral and emotional problems as well as deficits in social and academic competencies for children of all ages (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991a). Although conflict usually begins long before parents actually divorce, it does not necessarily end with separation and, in fact, may increase around divorce-related issues such as child custody or support, the division of property, and visitation rights (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). It is easy to imagine that when parents are continually fighting, especially about matters that directly concern the child such as visitation or moral issues, the child is likely to feel emotionally threatened. Thus, efforts to shield children from postdivorce conflict, or at least from the most detrimental types of conflict
Conflict that involves physical aggression, is about child-related issues, or goes unresolved, are important to the promotion of children's divorce adaptation (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Children also benefit from parental cooperation around child rearing following divorce. "Coparenting" is not simply the absence of interparental conflict, but rather the act of working together to raise children through shared communication, parenting responsibilities, and decision making despite divorce (Whiteside, 1998). Studies consistently show that coparenting is linked to better psychological functioning, academic performance, social competence, and lower levels of externalizing and internalizing symptoms among school-age children and adolescents in divorced homes (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Although not possible in some highly conflicted families, research suggests that with time, at least half of divorced families can achieve a reasonably cooperative parental alliance, marked by relatively high levels of cooperation and low levels of interparental conflict (Whiteside, 1998). Other families remain conflicted (i.e., low levels of cooperation, high levels of conflict) or disengaged (i.e., low levels of both cooperation and conflict) (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Whiteside, 1998). Clearly, strengths-based policies would be those that encourage these cooperative arrangements.

Custodial Parental Functioning and Relationship to Child

Because most children still reside primarily with their mothers following divorce, custodial mothers are in the prime position to provide children with critical support and guidance throughout the divorce process. The children of custodial mothers who provide high levels of postdivorce warmth, affection, and consistent discipline and supervision show fewer behavioral problems, perform better academically, and have more self-esteem and competencies than those in homes marked by lower quality parenting (see Hetherington, 1998; Wyman, Sandler, Wolchik, & Nelson, 2000). Moreover, psychoeducational programs designed to teach enhanced parenting skills to custodial mothers have demonstrated that their success in improving children's mental health and academic competence is accounted for by improvements in the quality of the mother–child relationship and discipline skills (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Wolchik et al., 2000). Because these interventions have been evaluated using randomized, experimental research designs, their findings provide strong causal evidence for the positive impact of postdivorce custodial parenting on children's well-being.

High-quality parenting is important to the development of all children and adolescents, facilitating the development of self-confidence, competence, and responsibility in children (Baumrind, 1989). In divorced families, the sense of relatedness provided by a strong mother–child bond may also reduce children's divorce-related fears and facilitate their acquisition.
of age-appropriate competencies despite the disruptive nature of divorce in their lives (Wyman et al., 2000). For example, an engaged, supportive mother could help a child keep up with his or her schoolwork in the midst of the father’s move out of the family home, a change in residence, or other stressful divorce-related transition.

During a period when high-quality parenting is so important to children, however, many newly divorced mothers are coping with feelings of stress, loneliness, depression, and “task overload” as they manage child rearing and work and financial responsibilities alone (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Although successfully navigating this process can eventually lead to enhanced confidence and emotional well-being (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), disruptions to quality parenting typically occur in the first few years following divorce (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Hetherington, 1998). Parenting eventually restabilizes for many, albeit at an average level of quality lower than in nondivorced families (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Hetherington, 1989). In addition, the presence of social support, such as when a mother enters into a supportive, intimate relationship with a new partner, can improve mothers’ emotional well-being and capacity to provide responsive parenting (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999). For others, characteristics that predate divorce, like antisocial personality (which is found more frequently among divorced relative to nondivorced mothers), make ongoing parent–child relationship problems, and consequently child adjustment problems, more likely (e.g., Simons, 1996). Thus, policies that affect parenting could be useful to families coping with both short- and long-term custodial parent–child relationship issues.

Noncustodial Fathers

Because few children reside in father-headed households, divorce usually results in reduced contact with fathers. A recent synthesis of the literature, however, demonstrates that for children ranging in age from preschool to young adulthood, the quality of parenting by noncustodial fathers and of father–child relationships, rather than the frequency of contact, is predictive of children’s academic success and degree of behavioral disturbance (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). High-quality fathering probably serves a function in children’s adaptation to divorce similar to that described for mothering. In addition, high-quality father–child relationships may elicit higher child support payments, alleviating financial difficulties that may decrease child adaptation, and reduce the task overload of custodial mothers, thereby indirectly improving mother–child relationships (Wyman et al., 2000).

Child Characteristics

Divorce is wrought with emotion for children and presents a myriad of changes over which children have little control (Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver,
1988). Thus, the most resilient children are those who have the internal resources to effectively modulate their experience of these changes. For example, children who are low in negative emotional reactivity (Lengua, West, & Sandler, 1998), feel they understand why things happen in their environment (Sandler, Kim-Bae, & MacKinnon, 2000), and do not interpret stressful events in a negatively biased manner (Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin, Sandler, & West, 1999) have fewer behavior problems, less anxiety, and higher self-esteem than children without these dispositional qualities.

The way children think about and cope with divorce has implications for their adjustment (see Wyman et al., 2000). For example, a fear of abandonment by one’s parents is associated with anxiety and other adjustment problems (Kurdek & Berg, 1987; Wolchik et al., 1993). Children who use active coping strategies, such as problem solving and positive thinking, develop an increased sense of efficacy or success regarding their ability to handle difficult situations and exhibit fewer mental health problems (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). Experimental evaluations of programs that teach children adaptive ways to think about and cope with divorce show that such programs enhance children’s mental health and competencies (see Emery, Kirzmann, & Waldron, 1999; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Wyman et al., 2000), further evidence that children’s divorce-related cognitions and coping behaviors are important mediators of their adjustment. Although the majority of these interventions have been provided to children in middle-to-late childhood or early adolescence, Pedro-Carroll and Alpert-Gillis (1997) successfully worked with kindergarten and first-grade children in this manner, suggesting that even young children can be taught to regulate their feelings, thoughts, and coping behaviors.

Environmental Stability

In divorce, many children also face a number of changes in their environment, such as moving to a new house or school or participating less in extracurricular activities. In general, cross-sectional studies find that when the circumstances and changes that children are exposed to following marital disruption are less stressful, they exhibit fewer behavioral problems and internalizing symptoms (e.g., Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, 1991). Given that some change is inevitable, the maintenance of consistent positive events, such as spending regular leisure time with parents or friends, appears to promote child well-being (Sandler et al., 1991).

Economic Decline

Recent research (Braver, 1999; Braver & O’Connell, 1998) and policy changes have thrown into question the conventional wisdom about how much economic decline is typically experienced by the custodial household. Eco-
nomic decline is generally adversely related to children's adjustment. This is likely due to its negative impact on custodial mothers' emotional well-being (Braver, Gonzalez, Wolchik, & Sandler, 1989) and parenting (Simons, 1996) and to the fact that forcing moves into less affluent neighborhoods diminishes access to quality schools and services and disrupts children's social networks (e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1997; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Available studies also suggest that economic hardship accounts more directly for some of children's long-term postdivorce difficulties, such as risk of high school dropout and teenage pregnancy (McLanahan, 1999).

POLICIES' PLAUSIBLE IMPACT ON MEDIATING FACTORS

We speculate in this section about the likely effects of various policies on the mediators that have been clearly related to child outcomes. Generally, these discussions highlight questions and issues to be considered and weighed by the decision maker in each case, rather than one-size-fits-all recommendations.

Custody

The evidence rather strongly suggests a direct link between joint legal custody and child well-being, as well as a favorable effect on the mediating factor of promoting more beneficial contact with the noncustodial father (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). However, the effect of physical custody on child well-being is less clear. In addition, there is little in the research to definitively conclude that one form of physical custody has a generally better impact on the mediators of children's well-being than another (e.g., Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997).

Currently, most states have a list of criteria for the court or others to use that guide physical custody placements. Based on the literature of mediating factors reviewed in this chapter, this list should weigh the arrangements that are most likely to (in order of importance) minimize conflict or shield the child from conflict; result in positive coparenting; expose the child to the least disrupted or most effective parent, promote the child's feeling of closeness to and high-quality parenting from the nonprimary parent, minimize environmental changes (e.g., replacing the primary parent, moving to a new house or school, or relocating to a new geographic locale), and result in the least economic decline. It is worth noting that the list comports only roughly with the typical state's list, and it is important to recognize that many of these goals may be in conflict with one another. For any given family, an arrangement might well favorably influence one mediating factor (such as giving custody to the parent with the highest level of parental effectiveness) while simultaneously influencing another unfavorably (for example, mini-
mizing the contact with the noncustodial parent). Each family has its own unique dynamics that require an individual weighing of the impact of different custody options on the mediating factors.

Visitation and Access

Much of what applies to custody applies equally well to access arrangements. There seems no consensus in the literature that one arrangement is to be generally preferred over another. Instead, arrangements should be sought that promote strong relationships with both parents (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Warshak, 2000) while shielding the child from conflict. Means should be sought that provide both parents with incentives for cooperation rather than conflict, while simultaneously promoting enough access for the child to have a beneficial relationship with the noncustodial parent.

Relocation

Because there is no research that directly evaluates the effect of relocation on child well-being, policymakers are faced with the task of weighing the competing effects on the mediating factors (Rotman, Tomkins, Schwartz, & Samuels, 2000). Mitigating against permitting moves away is the negative impact on the relationship with the nonmoving parent and the disruption to environmental stability (Warshak, 2000). Mitigating toward it is the potential to minimize conflict and the prospects of enhancing the quality of the relationship with the custodial parent or of greater economic prosperity if the move is for a better job (Wallerstein & Tanke, 1996). It appears that courts have largely decided this issue not solely on the basis of the child’s best interests, but also on the basis of the moving parent’s rights and interests.

Child Financial Support

There is little in the way of direct convincing evidence that child support payments improve child adjustment, although better financial circumstances have been shown to result in higher quality custodial parenting and, of course, less economic decline to the child. Concern over setting the level too high now appears warranted, however, based on recent findings concerning comparative standard of living (Braver, 1999). It has been noted that concern over such an inequity and “being treated as little more than a wallet” contribute to noncustodial parents’ disengagement (Braver & O’Connell, 1998), which can in turn diminish the benefits of a quality noncustodial parent-child relationship.
Divorce and Dispute Resolution Procedures

Children from families with low levels of marital conflict are almost never better off if their parents divorce, while those in highly conflicted families are better off divorcing if and only if the divorce will diminish the conflict, which it very frequently does not (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The challenge for policy is how to develop postdivorce arrangements that reliably lower conflict for those who were formerly conflicted. Toward this end, efforts to develop policies that de-escalate or shield children from conflict, which mediation and parent education programs do (Emery, 1994; Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, & Hoza, 1998), should be continued.

A PROPOSAL FOR A COMPREHENSIVE STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH: THE PUBLIC HEALTH MODEL

In this section, we develop a new proposal for a program to promote better child functioning after divorce by building on the favorable elements of policies currently in practice. Current thinking construes family dissolution not as a monolithic event, but rather as putting into motion a series of smaller events, some of which are deleterious but others of which are beneficial to children (as well as adults; Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 1988). The key to strengths-building policy development in this area is to maximize the events that positively modify the mediating factors discussed above while minimizing the events that negatively modify those factors. A public health model provides a useful way to conceptualize this alternative approach.

Divorce is clearly a public health problem for children, a pervasive part of our culture that is associated with negative health outcomes. Research has now elucidated several mediating factors that account for variability in children’s postdivorce adaptation. When an individual or family acquires many other public health disorders, such as a low-birthweight child, diabetes, or AIDS, a public health nurse is often assigned who makes home visits, informs and educates the victims about warning signs and possible progressions and ameliorative or preventive practices, assists in the proper use of such practices, commiserates and provides social support, determines what additional resources are necessary, and connects the family with these resources. Some aspects of this work involve “universal” services (e.g., the assignment of the home health nurse, the educational elements), which are minimally intrusive and thought to be uniformly helpful with no undesirable side effects, whereas other aspects involve more intensive and specialized “selected” or “indicated” services.

We envision an analogous approach to divorce following from the public health orientation. The primary goal of the system would be to prevent the public health problems for children that often accompany parental di-
orce by systematic intervention with the mediating factors that research has shown predict their trajectory. Some elements of a public health model already exist in current practice, such as parent education programs designed to improve parenting quality and shield children from conflict; our proposal extends these elements into a more comprehensive system. The key elements of such a public health approach include the divorce transition guide, early intervention, universal interventions, and more specialized interventions.

**Divorce Transition Guide**

A divorce transition guide (DTG), analogous to the public health nurse, would be assigned to each family. The mission of the DTG would be to assist the family in achieving forms and arrangements that are functional in the long term as it proceeds through the multiple transitions of divorce. Because all divorcing families come to the attention of the court, and because the court has considerable power to compel behaviors of the parties, the DTG would ideally be affiliated with the court. The DTG should be knowledgeable about the mediating factors important to children's well-being and work with the family to improve these factors. When the DTG confronts inevitable points of conflict—where the parents each want something distinctly different—they could either refer the family to mediation or themselves guide the family to resolutions in as nonadversarial a fashion as possible.

**Early Intervention**

The earlier the approach by the DTG, the better the prospects for strengths building. This intervention may happen even before the family comes to the attention of the legal system. Analysis of one of our own data sets revealed that 72% of families reported that either the husband or wife or both spouses had obtained “professional therapy for marital issues prior to the final separation.” Thus, marital counselors could inform the couple that if a decision is made to dissolve the marriage, they should immediately recontact the counselor for a referral to a DTG or contact the DTG themselves.

Presently, almost all services are conducted on a reactive basis: One or both parents must actively seek (and pay for) them. The proposed system, in contrast, is proactive: Services are actively brought to the attention of the couple, rather than waiting for them to request them.

**Some Universal Interventions**

Some services and programs are likely appropriate for virtually all divorcing families. Parental divorce education programs could be continued on a more or less mandatory universal basis because of their favorable impact on such mediating factors as custodial parent effectiveness, conflict levels,
and financial and emotional support of both parents. Education could be expanded to include more information about legal matters such as how child support works, common custody and access arrangements, and so on. Because children are so often misinformed about what their new life will be like, consideration should also be given to some universal short child psychoeducational programs.

**More Intensive Services and Intervention Programs**

A menu of other, more intensive services and intervention programs should be made available for those families who need and can benefit from them. At Arizona State University, for example, we tailor individual psychoeducational programs for custodial mothers (New Beginnings) and noncustodial fathers (Dads for Life). These programs are designed to strengthen mediating factors, including interparental conflict reduction, increased parenting skill, increased noncustodial parent-child contact, and payment of child support to protect economic well-being. Coping programs for children (such as our Kids Cope With Divorce) should be available.

The use of Special Masters to help resolve ongoing disagreements would be helpful to a great many families. Specialized programs for particularly troubled families would include domestic violence diversion programs and supervised visitation if a parent has a confirmed history of physical or sexual child abuse.

**As-Needed Services**

A menu of services to be selected on an as-needed, case-by-case basis should be available to families in consultation with the DTG. For maximum effectiveness, these programs and services should be chosen by the family after they have reviewed all options in the light of their own values. The role of the DTG should be to (a) develop a resource list of services available, (b) develop systems to help people review their options and decide what services are most appropriate for them, (c) identify who is at risk for negative outcomes, and (d) evaluate the new system and develop correctives.

**Follow-Up**

Continuous follow-up, case management, or monitoring is needed to address postdecree problems as they develop. Because it is clear that divorce requires almost continuous developmental adjustments from the family members, an effective DTG program would, like a public health nurse, regularly assess the family's status and problems and provide correctives as needed. As crisis times recede, this monitoring would become more sporadic but would always be available to any family member upon request.
A number of features of such a program are far less clear and require further consideration. Among them are the following:

- What training should the DTG have (e.g., legal, mental health)?
- What is the role of the family law attorney in such a system? How will the traditional role and training of the legal specialist be meshed with the other services? Because the focus is on what will help the child, how will the rights and interests of the parents be protected?
- How will the services be funded (e.g., public monies or by the couple)? If the latter, how will inability to pay be factored in?
- Are utterances of the parties to DTGs admissible or protected by confidentiality privileges?

CONCLUSION

Families, even those experiencing divorce, have many resources to draw on to promote better outcomes for all family members, especially the children. The goal of policy should be a seamless meshing with those resources and services already in place that facilitate healthy resolution and development. It is our hope that this chapter will stimulate a debate about these issues and facilitate consideration of a comprehensive public health approach.

REFERENCES


McLanahan, S. S., Seltzer, J. A., Hanson, T. L., & Thompson, E. (1994). Child support enforcement and child well-being: Greater security or greater conflict?


