

6 Children coping with parental divorce

What helps, what hurts?

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The purpose of this chapter is to study how children cope with their parents' divorce, what children say was and is difficult and painful, but also what they consider helpful. Through analysis of children's divorce stories, my focus will be on how they experienced the changes that they had to endure during the divorce process.

Most studies of the consequences of divorce for children have used large quantitative samples comparing children from nuclear families with children with divorced parents, or parental reports on how their children have coped during the divorce process (Thompson and Amato 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). The aim of these studies has been to identify factors that can increase the risk of a negative development for the children post-divorce. A number of studies have shown that changes such as loss of economic and social capital and impairment of parent-child relations are major risks. Even though these studies have provided valuable knowledge, they are insufficient because the children are usually seen as objects of research and as passive victims of their parents' divorce (Andenaes 1995; Alanen 1992). In order to understand the consequences of divorce for children, the children must also be the subjects of research and seen as social actors who participate in their parents' divorce. With increasing age, children, whether by refusing to change residence, insisting on deciding their own visitation schedule, or by other kinds of negotiations with their parents, are actively participating in the transformation of their families (Frønes 1998; James and Prout 1997). The first question asked here is whether changes that are widely recognized as major risks for children's development from the parents' point of view are seen as such by children.

In late modernity (Giddens 1992), in what has been called 'risk society' (Beck 1992), with its increased individualization, individuals are more dependent than before on social relations: family, kin and friends. When children as well as adults are expected to 'write their own stories' the reliance on the social network for support and necessary feedback in their identity work is crucial. Divorce is in itself an individualization process for adults as well as for children. Children who before divorce were seen as belonging to their parents in one home and in a nuclear family, after divorce become individuals with legal and economic rights. After divorce the children have to 'rewrite their story', develop new relations

with their parents and siblings and find a new place in their mother's and father's households. In late modernity and for children with divorced parents, I believe it is necessary to ask if weak or impaired parent-child relations do represent a greater risk to children's development and well-being than mere change.

The data

The data used in this chapter are from the study: 'Families after divorce' (Moxnes *et al.* 1999, 2000, 2001). This study consists of parental reports (questionnaires) on how their 910 children had coped with divorce (in the following referred to as 'The Parent Report'), interviews with 114 parents and interviews with 96 children. For the purpose of this chapter I have selected interviews with 52 children who experienced much change and who, in terms of theory, should be most troubled by divorce. Most of these children lived with their mother and only a few with their father. None of the children had parents who shared physical custody and, on average, they had less contact with their non-custodial parent than was common in Norway at the end of the 1990s (Jensen and Clausen 1997). The children's ages varied from eight to 18 years. Most citations used in the following are from the older children because they were the most articulate.

The children were asked to tell their divorce story. Among the topics they were asked to elaborate on were the experiences with and consequences of the following: decline in the household's level of income, change of residence, lack of daily contact with one of the parents and acquiring step-parents.

Children coping with change

As a point of departure and for reasons of comparison, a few results from one of the studies mentioned above, 'The Parent Report' (Moxnes *et al.* 1999), are used. This study, using parental reports on the consequences of divorce for their children, has shown that changes such as decline in household income levels and change of residence are major risks for children's development. On average, the children who experienced income decline and/or moved to a different house reflected more signs of negative effect and fewer of positive effect than those who did not experience such changes. There was not such a significant difference between children who had little or no contact with their non-residential parent and those who had frequent contact and between children with step-parents and those who had no step-parent. However, there was a significant difference in children's well-being as reported by the parents, between children who had residential step-parents and those who had non-residential step-parents.

Financial change in the child's household

According to the parents' reports, decline in the household income at the time of the divorce was a major risk to children's well-being (*ibid.*). The majority of the children we interviewed lived in households with low income.

divorce as individualization

low income

A few children said that they had more money of their own after the divorce: either they got some of the child support money as their own, or they were eligible for a state scholarship for high-school children with parents on a low income. A few other children said that the household standard of living was better because the mother now had control over the income and no longer had to pay for the father's expensive habits. However, most of the children acknowledged that their household income was low, and that it was worse after the separation. Some children said openly, 'we are poor', and expressed worries about the household's financial present and future. The older children explained why the income was low. In most cases it was because their mother did not earn much. She had little work experience, an unskilled job, worked part time, had gone back to college, or her income was a disability or a single-parent allowance. Other causes for the low income included the father not paying child support, paying too late, or paying less than he was supposed to pay.

The majority of the children said that their family's low income never had serious consequences for themselves. None of the 52 children reported that they could not participate in activities because of lack of money, but many said that they did not get pocket money and many told of a heavy workload at home. I understand these children's stories as expressions of solidarity with their residential parent. Instead of saying that they could not take part in snowboard skiing or continue playing in the school band because it was too expensive, they said they did not want to, or that they had lost interest. Instead of saying that they had to take responsibility for household chores because the mother had to work long hours, they said it was only fair that all family members shared the housework. And instead of complaining about not getting a weekly allowance, they said they did not need one, they got the money they needed when they asked. They expressed solidarity with their parent and took responsibility for the financial situation. The children had learned to be responsible in money matters. The interviews can be read as stories of how, through negotiations with parents and siblings, they became informed about the family income. But there are also stories of how, through discussions and self-reflexivity, they learned to see their own part in the family's financial situation and that there were alternative ways for coping (Finch and Mason 1993). For example, when Robert's bike had been stolen and he needed one badly, he also knew that he could not raise the money for a new one:

First my mother, sister and I discussed it, we agreed that my sister's shoes had to come first ... Then Mother talked to Dad, he agreed to pay one third. We decided that when I had worked and saved one third, she [mother] would pay the last third. I hope to make that before the summer is over.

(Robert, aged 13)

Through negotiations the children not only became informed and learned to be responsible, they were also given the right and possibility to influence their

? negotiation ? of solidarity

own situation. When children feel that their voice is heard, that their interests are given the same consideration as those of others, and the lack of money is seen as a shared family problem, then it is seen as fair and just and easier to accept. Having a say in money matters is one reason why few of the children considered themselves to be passive victims of the family's tight financial situation. Furthermore, they developed ways of coping. Among those children who were old enough, many earned their own money. They delivered newspapers, cut grass, took on babysitting duties or did housework in their own home. They had shown much initiative and creativity and were proud of it. However, some of the children told us that it was very difficult to be poor.

It is awful, not to have money, my mother worries, and we all fight, not about money, but because everything is so difficult ... I don't know any way to make it better.

(Berit, aged 17)

In the months, sometimes years, after the separation some of the children tried to understand and solve the money problems by arguing with their parents. Most of them gave up after a while. Instead they withdrew and avoided any discussion about money.

Low household income was also a problem for children whose parents were fighting over money and especially for children with fathers who did not pay the requisite child support. These children expressed more anger and/or sadness and little, if any, of the solidarity toward their parents mentioned above.

My father often doesn't pay [child support], he delays the payments, or pays less than he should. My mother thinks this is so because he wants to punish her, but he is punishing us at the same time ... It isn't fair, a few times we have not had money for food, and twice my mother has had to go to the social security office to ask for money ... I have seen the way my father and his new family live, they have plenty, we have nothing ... he has said many times that if I lived with him I would get more.

(Tom, aged 14)

Tom told us that he often wondered if his father really loved him and his sister, and that because of his father's behaviour, he would never move to live with him, he would rather be poor and live with his mother. Tom was hurt, so was Janne:

All the fights and worries about money make me feel that I am the problem, I should not cost anything ... if I did not exist they would not have anything to fight about.

(Janne, aged 15)

According to most of the children a low household income was a problem – it caused stress and living with it was hard. Thus the children supported findings from the parental report study, that decline in the household income is a risk for children's well-being. However, there was considerable variation in the extent to which lack of money was a problem, and in how the children coped with it. The children's stories must be understood in the context of the household's income level. The stories of children living in households which usually had some money left (often very little) after the bills were paid, differed considerably from those told by children living in households that had no money left, only piles of bills they were unable to pay. The first group of children were usually well-informed and understood the financial situation; they knew they had a say in money matters and that made them feel responsible. They presented the lack of money as a shared family problem. The second group of children, living in families where there was no money about which to negotiate and where parents often fought about money, had no way of influencing the use of money and felt powerless. Some were ashamed of being poor, withdrew socially, or felt rejected and unloved by one of the parents. For these children the lack of money was a practical problem, but more important, it had become a personal problem. This became damaging to family relations, socially devastating and threatening to their self-esteem. After divorce, the older children learned that they were economic subjects with the right to support from both parents. For some children this was a positive experience – they got their money and increased freedom. For others who had a mother with little money or a father who was unwilling to pay, economic rights became an empty formality with no consequence and this felt like a devaluation of themselves.

Residential mobility

The Parent Report showed that change of residence was a risk to children's well-being (ibid.). With few exceptions, the children we interviewed had changed residence when their parents separated or divorced, and some of them had moved more than once. Some had moved two or three times either because their mother was dependent on the local authority for housing and had to take what she was offered, or because their residential parent had found a new partner and together they had moved to a new home better suited to the needs of the extended household. Many of these families lived in an apartment that they rented.

Even if most of the children did not move far from the pre-divorce home, they said that it had been hard to leave. For some it was hard because the original home had been nicer and bigger than the new home and/or because the new home was in a less attractive neighbourhood. For others it was difficult because they moved so far from the old place that they could no longer have frequent contact with friends. But if leaving the pre-divorce home was bad, finding new friends and becoming included in the new community was worse. It was worst for those who knew nobody who could facilitate integration into

the new community. Few of the children mentioned the parents as facilitators. The parents usually were away at work most of the day, had friends in other parts of the town and had no time or need to acquire friends in their new neighbourhood. Integration was something the children often had to cope with alone. Some children were angry with their parent and felt that she or he had failed them by moving and/or not helping them to stay in contact with old friends and integrating into the new place.

I never wanted to move, that was what my mother and her boyfriend wanted. But they do not live here, I mean they are away working, and when they come home, they never leave the apartment. I am the one living here ... I have to go to that stupid school and take all the shit.

(Britt, aged 13).

The stories of Anna and Lisa, who both moved twice, illustrate the difficulties that changing residence can lead to and the differences in choice of coping strategies. Anna lived in East-town until she was nine. Her mother could not afford to keep the pre-divorce home, so they first moved to an apartment in another part of the town, where they lived for two years. The mother then met a new man and together they moved to a third place in town.

I have no friends here, but that does not matter, I do not like them, they only think about boys No, I do not go to the youth club ... nobody talks to me there ... I used to play football at East-town, but not here. Here the team is bad.

(Anna, aged 13)

According to Anna, absolutely everyone and everything was positive and fun in East-town, while everything was stupid and negative at the place where she had lived for the last two years. Anna went to school alone, was alone in school and returned home alone. Very seldom did she do anything after school except bake and prepare dinner for her family. She had become mother's little helper and was praised for her work. Lisa's story is similar. The first time she moved, Lisa changed school, but the second time she refused to. Her mother wanted her to change school because of the expense and the time it took to travel across town. Lisa was fighting to keep her friends and threatened her mother by saying she would move to her grandparents, or ask for a foster-home if she was forced to change school.

It was terrible to move from The Hill. I lost all my friends. It took a long time before I got to know anybody ... not before I started playing in the band Most of my friends play in the band, but we do a lot of other things too.

(Lisa, aged 12)

Neither Anna nor Lisa could do anything about the relocation of the home, but their ways of coping with the second residential move were different. Anna, as I understood her, felt it was too painful to actively seek new friends and became an unhappy and isolated child. Lisa stood up to her mother and spent a lot of time and energy on keeping her friends. She was satisfied and proud that she had managed to take charge of her own social life.

Changing residence at the time of divorce is considered a major risk factor for children's well-being, and the children's stories supported this. How great the loss and how much sorrow was caused depended on the distance between the old and new home and to what degree the parents were willing and able to help during the transition. There were striking differences in the stories of children who had taken part in the family negotiations as to when and where they should move. These children were usually well-informed and prepared when they moved and often they had made a deal with one or both parents that they should be helped so that they could keep in contact with old friends. Many children, even some who had to travel for more than an hour, continued at their pre-divorce school for some months, while others continued to play football or some other game with their friends in the old club. For children whose parents could not help them keep in contact with old friends, or who moved so far away that staying in contact was impossible, changing residence was more difficult. Many of these children's stories reflected months, even years, of being excluded from other children's activities, of being treated as invisible or of being pestered by the other children. Difficulties finding new friends often led to social isolation and developed into a personal problem because it forced the child to question his or her own attractiveness as a friend. Changing residence also made the individualization of the child more pronounced. Children who moved and/or had a parent who moved, had to develop new relationships and construct their own space in the new neighbourhood without much help from parents.

Loss of contact with parents

No large quantitative study has been able to show any relationship between the amount of contact children have with the non-residential parent and the children's well-being (Emery 1999). Neither did the Parent Report (*ibid.*). However, I do not believe that this indicates that the amount of contact with the non-residential parent is without importance for the child's well-being.

Most of the children who had frequent contact with their father were satisfied. A few children complained about the long distance between the parental homes, of having no friends at the place the non-residential parent lived and/or lack of flexibility in the visitation arrangements. Travelling long distances was tiring, having no friends at the father's place made staying there boring and rigid visitation schedules made it difficult to take part in important social activities.

Most of the children who had little or no contact with their father were not satisfied, but their emotions in regard to their father's absence and their ways of coping with that absence differed considerably. A few of the children who had infrequent contact were satisfied because they were used to not seeing their father much: he had worked far away or he had never taken much part in their life.

It's OK, I never saw my father much He works in Africa, he helps poor and sick children Next year I will go and see him. He has promised me that as a present for my confirmation.

(Ben, aged 12)

Others were relieved when they seldom or never saw the father because his behaviour had too often made them feel ashamed or frightened.

I am afraid when I have to go and see my father. I never know if he or my grandmother is drunk. When they are I try to leave, but that is difficult, they will not let me My brother never goes to see my father [he refuses to] that is unfair But if I do not go to see him he comes here to fetch me, and everybody in the building will see how awful and drunk he is.

(Anna, aged 13)

Anna tried to keep contact with her father at a minimum, but at the same time she missed him and was very hurt by his behaviour. Before the divorce she used to be 'Daddy's girl', but at that time she did not know that he was an alcoholic because her mother had done her best to keep that from the children.

Reduced or lost contact with one of the parents had been a problem for many of the children and is a risk for children's well-being post-divorce. How much of a loss and how painful reduced contact was depended on the amount of that contact and the reasons behind it. Children living in households where negotiation between parents and children was part of the normal communication usually had the necessary information as to why they had a certain visitation schedule. Visitation was flexible and the children felt free to argue for both more or less contact with the non-residential parent. These children knew that their voice was heard, that the parents considered their needs and wishes to be important, and therefore felt that they had both responsibility for, and control over, the relationships with their parents (Schultz-Jørgensen 1999). The majority of children presented the lack of contact as an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the divorce, the parents' work situation, lack of money and/or the distance between the parental homes. They did not present the reduced contact with the non-residential parent as a personal problem, but rather as a shared family problem and as nobody's fault. It was those children who seldom had contact with the non-residential parent who seemed most hurt and disturbed when they talked about that relationship. In these cases one

or often both parents were unwilling or unable to negotiate a schedule for the child's contact with the non-residential parent and therefore the child could do little to influence the relationship with the father. Regardless of whether the children wanted more or less contact, it was those children who could not understand why they seldom had contact with the father who were most unhappy. These children were unable to provide a personally and/or socially acceptable explanation as to why, and that troubled them (Dahlhaug 2001). For these children the relationship with the non-residential parent had become a personal problem: they wondered if they no longer were lovable since the absent parent treated them as he did.

The saddest thing with the divorce was getting used to having two different parents.

(Karin, aged 15).

Karin's statement is an illustration of divorce as a process of individualization. Instead of relating to the parents as a set, it becomes, to an increasing degree, the child's responsibility to develop a relationship with each parent and to keep those relationships separate.

Extension of the family with step-parents

The Parent Report showed no significant differences in well-being between children with and without step-parents (*ibid.*). However, I do not believe that this is because step-parents have no effect on the child's well-being. The same study showed significant differences in well-being between children with a residential step-parent and those with a non-residential step-parent, the former group on average doing better.

The children told of a stressful period when they got a new step-parent; they were worried about what she or he would be like and if this new person would make a negative change in their lives. Per expressed what most of the children were afraid of at that time:

You know what is said about step-parents, they are awful towards step-children.

(Per aged 13).

However, after a while most children recognized the importance of step-parents and the economic and social resources they had brought to the household. In time most step-parents, especially residential step-parents, were considered to be a gain.

There were differences in the stories of children with residential and non-residential step-parents. Of most importance was the difference in process. While having a residential step-parent was usually the result of a long process of negotiation in which the child had time to get to know the step-parent,

and the child's opinions as to when and under what conditions she or he could share the home were crucial, having a non-residential step-parent was another kind of process. In that process, only few children had a say and many did not meet the step-parent before she or he was living with the non-residential parent.

Among the children we interviewed who lived permanently with a step-parent, all but two lived in their mother's household. Most of these children told of a good relationship. They talked about their stepfather as someone who belonged in the family, a friend who was often of help, and many like Per stressed the financial importance of the stepfather's presence in the household:

If he had not earned that much money we could not have kept the house.

(Per, aged 13)

Only some very few called the stepfather Father or Dad. On the contrary, a number of children stressed that even though they liked the stepfather, he was not a father. We were told many stories about children's resistance when the step-parent tried to behave as a father and make decisions on their behalf. The stepfather's status in the family was dependent on his relationship with the mother. As long as the children could see that their mother was happy, that the stepfather contributed to the household tasks and did not interfere too much in the children's own lives, they accepted him, or were happy that he lived with them. Otherwise, they openly expressed their dissatisfaction or distanced themselves from him. In the five years that had passed since Lisa's mother separated from her father, four men had lived with them. Lisa had learned to distance herself from her mother's boyfriends.

Women have to have a man, it is natural, but he has nothing to do with me. He is not my stepfather, he is not a father, he is only my mother's boyfriend Luckily he is gone a lot, because he is a truck driver If he is here and my mother is away I stay in my room until she is back. I have promised my grandfather, I shall not be alone with her men.

(Lisa, aged 12)

Lisa knew that there was nothing she could do to stop her mother from bringing men into the home. Instead, she built a 'wall of politeness' between herself and her mother's boyfriends.

Among the children who had non-residential step-parents all but three had a stepmother. The stories about the step-parents in the non-residential parent's home differed more widely. Some children expressed happiness that their father had a new cohabitant or wife. They related how their father had become happier and more fun to be with since she came into his life. Others disliked their father's new partner, usually because she made them feel like an outsider, and not welcome, or because they seldom got to spend time alone with the father. A few children disliked the stepmother so much that they refused to visit their father.

Sometimes I have to be together with her [stepmother] and her kids, but if I have been with them one weekend, I can force him to go away with me alone. .

(Eva, aged 14)

Other studies have indicated that it is more difficult to be a stepmother than a stepfather and that children are often more satisfied with their stepfathers than with their stepmothers (Robinson and Smith 1993). Such discrepancies are usually explained by the higher expectations placed on stepmothers as compared to stepfathers. That might be true, but according to the children it is also a question of gains and losses. Because most of the children did not spend much time with the non-residential step-parent they really did not know her. Therefore, they had difficulties seeing that she had anything to offer them. Instead, they saw and felt that she and the step-siblings took the attention, time and money that the father used to give to them. For these children the step-parent represented no gains, only losses. Even if most of these children blamed the stepmother and excused their fathers for this, by doing so they presented their father as weak, as someone unable to stand up to his wife.

According to the children, acquiring step-parents had been a stressful process. However, having parents who, from the child's point of view, gave priority to the new spouse and step-siblings, became a personal problem. It was damaging to the parent-child relationship and painful to the children who wondered why the step-parent and/or step-siblings seemed to be more worthy of the parent's love than themselves. Having step-parents also increased the individualization of the child. We were told many stories of new love-relationships that took so much time and space that the child felt as an outsider or lonesome in both parents' homes.

'Not good enough parenting'

The dominant theme in many children's stories was that the difficulties they had when coping with changes during the divorce process were made worse and even more painful when the parents did not co-operate and/or give the child sufficient support. What is called 'not good enough parenting' includes a high level of conflict between the parents, lack of parental involvement and incompetent parenting. Other studies have shown that the parent-child relationship is often impaired during the divorce process (Emery 1999; Gittins 1998).

Most children told of a close and good relationship with both parents before and after divorce and of an improved relationship with the residential parent post-divorce. After the separation they got to know their mother better, their respect for her increased and they felt she was treating them with more respect. The mother-child relationship had become closer, friendlier and more democratic. Only a few children told a different story about the residential parent. These children had a mother who had not coped well with the divorce. She was

still mourning the loss of her spouse and/or had not managed to reorganize the children's or her own life. Some of these children felt deceived, or abandoned, by the mother. They felt sorry for her and pictured her as a weak person for whom they had lost respect. Katrina was one of the children who had to 'parent her own parent' for years after divorce. When describing her mother she used words such as 'nervous', 'afraid', 'sad' and 'depressed':

She does all kinds of things to make me stay at home, rents movies, makes food she knows I like When I leave she often cries quietly, that makes me feel terrible I have to see friends.

(Katrina, aged 13)

Children 'parenting their parents' was a common phenomenon in the first month following the separation. Many children told stories about how they put the parents' needs above their own and tried to comfort, care for and do practical chores for unhappy parents. Most of these children were proud of being able to help their parents. However, when the parent was unable to behave as a parent for a longer period of time, then 'parenting the parent' became too heavy a burden. Children were parenting both residential and non-residential parents. Anna (cited previously) also tried to 'mother her dad'. In the first year after the separation she visited him, cleaned the house and made lists of what he needed to buy. She even tried to control his drinking. She gave up trying to help him when he moved in with his mother, who also was a heavy drinker.

As already mentioned, some children's stories were about losing contact with their non-residential parent, in most cases the father. He was no longer involved in their life, at least not in the way they expected a father to be. Many children presented their non-residential father as weak because he was dependent on drugs, had an antisocial lifestyle or was unable to stand up to the new spouse. The unhappiest among these children were those who could not understand why the father who once loved them dearly no longer made an effort to see them.

Most children had no recollection of quarrels or fights between their parents during the divorce process, but a significant minority of children said that the parents had frequent arguments before, during and/or after divorce. Every child who told that the parents were still arguing or fighting also said that this was a painful problem, which made them sad or angry. While children with parents who were friends or friendly towards each other felt free to continue and strengthen their relationship with both parents, children with parents in conflict felt caught in the middle of the conflict. Parental conflicts, which were hard to cope with when the parents were married and lived together, often became more of a burden after separation when the child was the only link between the parents - the link through whom all the harsh words, blame, accusations and threats were passed (Öberg and Öberg 1992). In order to handle the hostility between the parents many children erected an 'information-proof

did a parent

wall' between the two homes. By never carrying any information, positive (which often was the worst) or negative, between the two households the child could avoid accusations of favouring, defending or taking sides with one of the parents (Lian Flem 2001; Christensen 1999). It was hard for these children to live with parents who were constantly fighting, often for their own parental rights, and who paid little attention to the child's needs and desires (Smart 1999). Likewise it was hard to live with parents who were weak or so self-centred that they did not recognize or acknowledge the child's need for love and caring. However, incompetent or insufficient parenting is not always, even in most of these cases, a result of divorce: often it is the reason for divorce. According to the majority of the children who told of conflict between parents and incompetent or insufficient parenting, such parenting had been a problem long before divorce (Block *et al.* 1986).

Coping successfully with parental divorce – a matter of negotiation or resignation

The children's stories supported the results from the Parent Report, namely that decline in the household level of income, change of residence and having step-parents, especially non-residential step-parents, are difficult, stressful and therefore a risk to children's well-being. The children's stories did not support the finding from the Parent Report that the amount of contact with non-residential parents was without importance for children's well-being. On the contrary, children who had little or no contact with their father were in most cases unhappy because of that poor relationship. According to the children, separation and divorce was a stressful process and adjusting to all the associated changes was both difficult and painful. However, these were changes, stress and loss of resources the children learned to cope with when given sufficient time and support. Such problems seemed to be easier to cope with when they were shared, defined as a family problem and as an unfortunate, but necessary, result of divorce. The children living in families where there was no room for negotiation, where the children were seldom heard and their needs and wishes not given due consideration, often felt neglected by the parents, and lonely and unsure about their identity.

Divorce is a process of individualization of family members. In our culture individualization is seen as positive and understood as producing increased autonomy, independence and freedom – all positive concepts from the point of view of adults and youth. But to children who are dependent on their parents, individualization can mean increased vulnerability and loneliness. Some of the stories told by the children showed that they had been able to benefit from the increased individualization. They were conscious that the divorce was a realization of their legal and financial rights and they got their own money as part of the child support payment or through a scholarship. More important, they were part of a reflexive discourse in which problems, disagreements and the division of responsibilities were solved through negotiation. Reflexive discourse and

negotiation are both conditions for, and consequences of, individualization. Family negotiation is an expression of the individualization of the child and the democratization of the parent-child relationship. It is a recognition of the child as an individual – not an equal to the parent in all matters, but often in matters concerning the child. Family negotiations seem to be the best means for helping the child through the divorce in a healthy way. By negotiating, the children got necessary information, shared their point of view with their parents, learned to see the world from different points of view and, finally, by so doing, discovered that they could choose alternative ways of coping. The stories told by children who lived in families 'drained' of economic and social resources, where there was no room for negotiation, showed that they had not benefited from individualization. In their stories, self-determination or freedom of choice was almost never mentioned. Even though some had fought for their needs and wishes in the beginning, passive acceptance, resignation and withdrawal eventually seemed to be their only options.

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7 As fair as it can be?

Childhood after divorce

Amanda Wade and Carol Smart

Family life no longer happens in one place but is scattered between several different locations.

(Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002: 92)

Introduction

In this chapter we will address what it means for children to experience their family lives as scattered between several different locations and how they manage the inevitable problems and challenges of sustaining relationships through the apportioning of time and space. Our focus is on post-divorce family life where parents live in different locations and parent-child relationships are maintained in large part through the dividing of children's time more or less equally between households. We refer to this practice as co-parenting after divorce or separation. Our main focus will be on the accounts of the children we have interviewed in two studies¹ in which they talk about what it is like to be shared between their parents and to live their lives across different households with different kin and step-kin. But the context in which this empirical data is discussed is an ethical one, namely the concept of fairness. We draw this concept of fairness from the narratives of the children themselves and we shall pay attention to the ways in which they conceptualize this moral concept, and also what it means when they actually set it into operation. However, before we turn to this data, we shall focus on the idea of fairness and why it seems to have entered so powerfully into the imagination of the children of divorced parents.

Fairness and families

As Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002) argue, 'the family' is no longer understood to be a unit with homogeneous interests. They suggest that this is largely because sociologists recognize that men and women have different interests, are positioned differently in the family and may have very different life trajectories. Sociological work also increasingly acknowledges that children are players in family life. This means that we begin to appreciate that each child may have different interests, be positioned differently in the family