

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF RELOCATION FOR
CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

I. INTRODUCTION

II. DEFINING RELOCATION

III. MOTIVATIONS FOR RELOCATION

IV. RELEVANT PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

V. CONCLUSION

I. INTRODUCTION

The divorce of parents significantly undermines their children's sense of security and stability. The two people upon whom the child is dependent are no longer equally accessible to the child and the foundation of the child's world is splintered. From the child's perspective, the best of all possible worlds, after parental divorce, includes parents who are amicable, do not display overt hostility, can communicate with each other about the child, and live close enough to each other so that child can have the same playmates when with either parent. These conditions maximize the potential for the child developing strong, positive relationships with both parents as well as for both parents' involvement in the child's school and extracurricular activities and for frequent and regular contact with the nonresidential parent. When a residential or custodial parent, then, seeks to move to a different geographic region that best possible post-divorce scenario for children is threatened. The wish to relocate poses the most dramatic example of the conflicting needs and wishes of parents and children and of the conflicting needs and wishes of custodial and noncustodial parents. For the most part, children do not wish to leave the environment in which they live nor do they wish to leave their noncustodial parent, who also does not want them to go. Parent and child relocation, which has become a major problem facing mental health and legal professionals, is, however, inevitable in a mobile society.

Psychological research has yet to focus extensively on the impact of relocation on children. Perhaps this is because relocation as an issue is relatively new, too infrequent to obtain a sufficient sample of cases, and, of course, too geographically widespread to make the study of these families feasible. A vast body of psychological literature, however, exists regarding the relationship of other variables, such as interparental conflict, to children's well-being following parental divorce. In this article, I present the major considerations involved in examining relocation cases, such as definitions of relocation, psychological issues germane to relocation decisions, the context in which relocation occurs, and the various motivations for relocation.

The research dealing with psychological factors, such as the child's contact with the nonresidential parent, interparental conflict, the age of the child, parent-child relationships, and the parents' level of functioning, are discussed in terms of their significance for relocation. Finally, several factors are identified that are consistently related to positive adjustment in children of divorce. These factors include positive adjustment of the custodial parent, a positive relationship between the child and custodial parent, and a low level of conflict between the parents. Findings regarding contact with the noncustodial parent have been found to be inconsistent and subject to wider variation than the other factors mentioned. The need to consider the potentially conflicting wishes of the child and of the parents is also explored. Finally, the delicate task of reconciling the relocation issue with the best interests of the child is addressed. While the best interests of the child standard should be a priority in any custody decision, the larger family system cannot be neglected, especially in relocation cases. The importance of the family context is acknowledged in the standards adopted by of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts which state that the primary purpose of a custody evaluation is to assess the family. The binuclear family consists of two households, with the child living in both. The binuclear family includes stepparents, step-siblings, even former spouses of stepparents as well as parents, full siblings and half siblings. While

this is a broad definition of the post divorce family constellation, it highlights the interconnectedness of the various people involved. Children usually continue to consider both of their parents as part of their family, even following the parents' separation or divorce. When children are asked to draw a picture of their family, they include both of their parents even if their parents have long been divorced. If the interests of the entire family, which includes the parents, other children, extended family members, and, sometimes, other parties who may have significant relationships with the children are ignored, there may be negative consequences for all members of the family system. Thus, relocation cases, like other custody or visitation cases, need to be considered from a developmental or life cycle family systems perspective. The parties need to be considered as "individuals at different developmental stages in the context of a separating family". The term "separating" is used because a relationship between the parents continues past the physical separation, divorce, and even remarriage. The most psychologically sound approach is to determine the best interests of the family, with the children's interests paramount. Even then, what is in the best interests of siblings of different ages and characteristics may not be the same.

II. DEFINING RELOCATION

From the moment parents physically separate, greater geographic distance is imposed between the children and the nonresidential parent, and their relationship changes qualitatively. For the non-residential parent and the child, the separation interrupts the natural rhythm of the parent-child relationship. Nonresidential parents lose the normal day-to-day contact with their children, so much of which revolve around the commonplace activities of life.

The full burden of daily child care falls to the residential parent, who must now assume responsibilities that were the realm of the now-absent parent. Under the best circumstances, the child's relationship with both the nonresidential and the residential parent changes dramatically from the moment of parental separation.

The major psychological task facing children and parents is to consolidate their relationships under the new conditions of their lives.

Most mental health professionals agree that, following separation and divorce, as few changes as possible should be made in the lives of children. Staying in the family home, at least for several months, often helps children maintain a sense of stability and continuity, as does remaining in the same school. Moving from one home to another is generally not an issue that comes before the court. In fact, it is a frequent consequence of divorce as parents move from the marital home to another residence. When moving becomes cast as relocation, and the residential parent seeks to remove the children from the home community, moving may then become a legal issue.

A. RELOCATION AS A DISTANCE CONTINUUM

Relocation can be viewed in terms of a continuum of distance between the noncustodial or nonresidential parent and the child. The implications for visitation between the nonresidential parent and the child change significantly with the distance. As distance increased, the children in their sample saw their noncustodial parents less.

Living a few minutes apart enables the nonresidential parent to continue to be involved in the children's lives in a more spontaneous way. The parent can attend school functions as well as pick children up at school. Older children may be able to visit on their own, and "dropping by for a visit" is also possible. Children can have the same friends, whether they are with their mother or father. The natural flow of the child's life does not have to be further disrupted. Where the child and residential parent stay in the same community, as described above, one might consider this as a residential move but not relocation. Once a child lives more than twenty minutes away from the nonresidential parent, sustaining the relationship between them necessitates

fragmenting the child's life and activities. A move that results in a new town, a new school, and an hour or more of traveling time, produces yet another qualitative shift in the impact of the move.

Brief visits are no longer possible. The child has a different life, one in which the nonresidential parent is now an outsider, no longer sharing the same experiences or even the same environment. Spending time together requires serious planning and interferes with the child's routine. Moving to a new town certainly constitutes a relocation, but day visits may still be feasible, depending on the distance. For most people, the term relocation evokes the image of moving three thousand miles across the country. Whenever a move necessitates overnight visitation, extensive travel time or expense, the potential for significant psychological repercussions is magnified. Relocation cases can be further divided into those where weekend visits are possible and those that require an even greater span of time. When children spend one or two weekends a month away from their primary residence, their own social networks may be disrupted. They cannot join the soccer team that has practice on Saturday or go to a friend's birthday party. When the distance is too great to permit weekend visits, children may spend their holidays and vacations away from their residential family and friends. By a certain age, most children do not want to spend the bulk of their weekend or vacation time with either parent but prefer to spend it with peers. One thirteen year old boy succinctly told his residential mother that he did not want to spend a month with his father or a month with her only. He just did not want to spend that much time with either parent and not with his friends.

Greater physical distance also imposes increased financial demands. Travel (and lodging expenses, if the parent travels) need to be considered in planning visits for the child and nonresidential parent. In one case, a custodial mother sought to return with her child to her home in Chennai. The judge's decision to allow her to do so was, in part, based on the father's great wealth which enabled him to visit frequently.

B. RELOCATION IN INTACT FAMILIES

Approximately twenty percent of Indian families move every year, that is, they change their residence and establish a new address. Relocation, even for an intact family, is generally considered a stressful event, in part, because it frequently occurs as a result of other life changes, such as a new job. Change in residence is one of the life events assessed in their stress test for adults. Many child experts believe continuity and stability are necessary for positive development in children. Moving disrupts that continuity and stability. Whether relocation has positive or negative effects on the adjustment of children relates to many variables, such as the distance of the move, the frequency of moves, and parental attitude toward the move. Moving can be more difficult for those family members who have the least choice about the decision, such as the children and, in an employment situation, the spouse of a transferred worker. Children with prior psychological or academic problems may also experience increased difficulty following relocation. The significance of the child's prior psychological status was underscored in a study of the effects of corporate mobility on children's adjustment. The two major factors that accounted for the children's adjustment were the children's prior adjustment and parental satisfaction and self-confidence. Factors such as characteristics of the child, special needs, or ethnic differences may also contribute to difficulty in relocation for particular children. For example, a child with specific academic needs may move from a school with excellent resources to one with limited resources. Similarly, a child may move from a diverse community to a more homogeneous one where he or she is a member of a minority group. Upon moving from a large city to a small town, one child expressed distress because he was not used to dressing the way everyone else did.

Under ordinary conditions, children generally adjust to the move after a relatively short amount of time. Although for an intact family, extended family members and friends may be missed, children still have the support and presence of their parents when

the family moves together. For an intact family, the move can be a positive event. Preventing a move may be more harmful than moving, where benefits are derived from moving. Children's life changes, which included changing schools, mother starting work, and moving to a new house, are the "most significant determinants of children's post-divorce maladjustment." Degree of environmental change (represented by a composite score based on moving to a different home, different neighborhood, or different school) was negatively related to frequency of father visits for low-conflict divorced families only. It was not related to regularity or duration of visits or regularity of child support payments for either low or high conflict families.

Moving cannot be separated from other variables that could account for the results. For instance, a mother beginning work following a divorce or the children and residential parent moving to lower quality housing can confound the effects of moving itself. Divorce already separates the child from one parent, even if that parent spends a significant amount of time with the child post divorce. Even grown children have reported anxiety when parents move out of the family home, whether related to divorce or to married parents leaving an empty nest for a smaller place.

The loss of the family home marks a loss of the familiar and safe. For a child as well as an adult child of divorce, the loss provides a concrete marker to the end of their childhood family. Relocation to a new area may be experienced as the final representation of the family break-up for the child.

III. MOTIVATIONS FOR RELOCATION

For intact families, relocation is most often associated with job changes, whether under civilian or military circumstances. Following a separation or divorce, a residential parent's wish to relocate beyond the marital community may stem from a variety of reasons. The stated reason may be positively or negatively motivated and may or may not be a true representation of the

underlying reason for seeking to move. Some of the commonly identified reasons are discussed below.

A. CHANGE IN MARITAL STATUS

For most adults, divorce triggers the desire to start over. Moving to a new community that does not have the markers associated with the ended unhappy marriage may be seen as the first step toward a new life. Those who divorced were significantly more likely to change their residence than those who did not divorce.

Of those who moved, sixty-two percent of the divorced subjects and fifty-seven percent of the married subjects changed communities. In a smaller study of geographic mobility, most people did not consider relocating after separation. Those separated or divorced women who did relocate were better adjusted than those who did not. Interestingly, the men who moved manifested poorer adjustment after the move than women who moved or men who did not move. The study did not identify whether or not the men or women had children. Remarriage is also a motivator for relocation, sometimes because the new spouse lives in a different area and sometimes because the new couple wishes to start their life together away from the former spouse.

B. GREATER ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunity to reduce costs or increase income are often mentioned by parents who want to relocate. In some cases, parents may be offered positions, in a distant location, that are more lucrative or may advance their careers. It is well-documented that the economic status of many custodial mothers and their children declines after marital dissolution. While the decline of income may account for some of the negative impact of divorce on children, it does not appear to be a primary determinant. The economic consequences of divorce, however, may encourage custodial parents to seek better conditions beyond the marital community.

C. BETTER SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Seeking more emotional, social, or practical support is another reason parents give for wanting to relocate. In some instances, primary residential parents wish to return to their childhood region, where their own parents live. In one situation, a mother said that she would be able to work full-time if she lived near her retired parents, who could provide free childcare. Men more often said they wanted to move for job considerations and women for social support systems.

For the most part, the reasons described can be seen as emanating from positive rationales. In contrast, the desire to relocate is sometimes prompted by the wish to get away from the other parent. Many parents primarily want to increase the geographic distance between themselves and their former spouses. That this would not be a legitimate reason for relocation. Nonetheless, where a highly conflictual relationship exists between the parents, reducing the contact between hostile parents can reduce the level of stress for children as well as for the parents. Furthermore, where violence is present, continued exposure of children to violence can be detrimental to their wellbeing. In one of the few psychological articles specifically addressing motivation for relocation. Although he acknowledges the wide span of motivations for relocation, he proposes two kinds of typical cases. In the first case, the residential parent is described as acting to deprive the nonresidential parent of access to the child. This scenario is similar to that described above and assumes deliberate manipulation. In the second case the primary parent “usually a middle-upper class, educated homemaker mother, seeks to escape the perceived humiliation of remaining in the “father’s community. Moreover, he suggests that relocating becomes an attractive idea because the mother experiences powerlessness and fears losing her children. In this description, the mother appears to be unaware of the dynamics motivating her wish to move. In either scenario, relocation may or may not be an appropriate action. When the different motivating factors result in more or less detrimental consequences for the children is not yet known.

When a custodial parent requests permission to relocate, the dynamics between the parents and between the parents and children change. Whether or not the question becomes a matter of litigation, the power balance between the parents, as well as the children's perceptions of their parents, is likely to be altered. "The serious relocation request marks a turning point in the life of the post-divorce family". Regardless of the end result, there is no way to return to the previous relationships.

IV. RELEVANT PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS:

IMPLICATIONS OF RELOCATION

It is generally accepted that children from divorced families tend to have more psychological difficulties than children from continuously intact families. A number of researchers embrace the view that children's responses to family disruption are varied, with most children adapting appropriately to their parents' divorce and a minority suffering long-term negative psychological consequences. While it is true that adult children of divorce are over-represented in clinical populations, the difference in psychological well-being between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of no divorced parents is generally small. The impact of divorce in fact, may be weakening as it has become more commonplace. Studies conducted in the 1980's indicate weaker effects than earlier studies. In the context of the overall literature on the effects of divorce on children, a diversity of reactions appears to be the most reasonable conclusion, with most children adjusting well after the initial period of trauma and transition pass. The consensus among professionals in this field is that several factors relate to these results. The prospective relocation of the residential parent needs to be considered in the context of these variables.

A. CONTACT WITH THE NONRESIDENTIAL PARENT

Relocation has a direct and immediate impact on the physical contact between the child and the nonresidential parent. Realistically speaking, in about eighty percent of divorce

situations, the residential parent is the mother and nonresidential parent is the father. When one talks about contact with the nonresidential parent, one is most often talking about time with Dad. The significance of that contact is especially relevant to relocation decisions.

The consensus among most mental health professionals is that, absent unusual circumstances, children are better off if they have contact and good relationships with both parents. What, then, happens to children who are deprived of frequent and regular contact with one parent because of geographic distance? Early research on father absence suggested that the younger the child, the greater the negative impact of the father's absence on the child. Many of the early studies did not differentiate, however, whether the father was absent due to divorce, military service, death, or abandonment. Other reports suggested that children of particular ages are more vulnerable than others.

While children with parents absent because of death or divorce generally have more problems than children in intact families, children in divorced families have more problems than those who lost a parent through death. Children who experience the death of a parent may be subjected to fewer negative events and more positive ones. They generally have not been exposed to interparental hostility or asked to choose between their parents. They also have additional sources of support, such as the extended family of the absent parent. Following divorce, more than twenty percent of children have no or infrequent contact with their noncustodial fathers. Increased distance between noncustodial fathers and their children appears to be related to decreased paternal involvement. Non-custodial mothers are more likely to stay in contact with their children than non-custodial fathers. They also tend to be more supportive of their children and more effective in parenting behaviors than nonresidential fathers. It is difficult, however, to predict the parenting behavior of fathers after a divorce on the basis of their pre-divorce behavior. Some fathers who were actively involved with their children find intermittent contact with

their children painful and withdraw from them. Other fathers may increase their involvement with their children. In many conflictual marriages, spouses may avoid contact with each other, often leaving fathers with fewer opportunities to be with the children, if the mother is the primary caregiver. Once the parental relationship is severed, the noncustodial father no longer has to engage his spouse in order to be with the children and the mother's role as a buffer or gatekeeper is modified. Because of this unpredictability, the level of pre-divorce parental involvement is not necessarily a valid determining factor for the effects of relocation on the noncustodial parent-child relationship. Because geographic distance makes it more difficult to maintain the prior level of closeness or to achieve a new level of closeness, relocation may exacerbate the withdrawal of noncustodial fathers. The research provides mixed results regarding the effect of contact with the nonresidential parent. For some children, contact with their nonresidential parent was associated with greater well-being, whereas, for others, it was associated with poorer adjustment or was not associated at all. Frequency of contact alone is not associated with positive effects for the child. Where low conflict exists between the parents, contact with the noncustodial father appears to have a positive impact on children. For adolescents, even a relatively small amount of contact may be sufficient to maintain a solid relationship between the child and the noncustodial parent. Based on the general body of developmental literature and my experience, younger children, however, may not be able to develop and maintain as close a relationship with a nonresidential parent, if geographically separated. The nature of contact and the relationship appear to be more significant than the frequency of contact. In a study of residential arrangements, eighty-eight percent of the adolescents reported that they visited their nonresidential parents because they liked being with them. When noncustodial parents share a variety of activities, including the routine, everyday activities, with their children, the children's well-being is enhanced. The major implication of these findings is that, subsequent to divorce, children need the nonresidential parent to fulfill the customary parental roles of monitoring

homework, attending school events, spending holidays together, making decisions, and disciplining them. Being a “vacation” parent may not be sufficient. Most nonresidential fathers are more likely to act as friendly companions rather than to assume these usual parental roles. The greater the geographic distance between the child and the nonresidential parent, the less likely that the nonresidential parent can assume the traditional parental roles or participate in the ordinary activities of the child’s life. Contact with the nonresidential parent becomes special and takes both the child and parent away from their normal routines. As one child noted, when contemplating traveling two thousand miles to spend her vacation with her nonresidential parent, she wanted to stay home so she would not miss time with her friends. Children at different ages, of course, have different reactions to long spans of time with parents. In exceptional circumstances, such as where one parent suffers from a severe mental illness, is physically or sexually abusive, or has a substance abuse problem, no contact with that parent may be best for the children. If one parent is incapable of providing adequate care and supervision of the child, supervised visitation or no visitation may be in the child’s best interests. Where the parents have a highly conflictual relationship, little or no contact between the child and the non-residential parent has been related to more positive child adjustment. In these situations, the less contact between the parents, the less exposure of the child to overt parental hostility. Clearly, contact with the noncustodial parent is one factor that contributes to the adjustment level of the child. The quality of the contact appears to be more important than the length or frequency of contact. The two, however, are not independent variables because the type of relationship may be subtly influenced, in part, by the frequency of contact. A child may not ask for advice about his or her friends if the parent does not know the friends. Similarly, a parent may be reluctant to help a child when the parent does not know the people or circumstances involved. Additionally, research techniques may not be sufficiently sophisticated to identify the impact on the child of missing a parent or of a parent not sharing the child’s first recital or not knowing the child’s best friend.

B. CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTAL FIGURES

Parental conflict has been consistently associated with poor psychological outcomes for children. Conflict is a primary factor related to the adjustment of children after the divorce of their parents. Children whose parents fight in front of them are likely to exhibit a wide range of negative behaviors, whether or not their parents remain together or divorce. Children from high-conflict intact families exhibit lower self-esteem and poorer adjustment than children from divorced families or from low-conflict, intact families.

Parental conflict has been identified as the differentiating variable in studies comparing the success of mediation and litigation in resolving custody disputes and of joint versus sole physical custody. In high conflict divorces, court-ordered joint physical custody and frequent visitation were related to poorer child adjustment, particularly for girls. The most deleterious effects of conflict are manifest in those children whose parents involve them in the battle by encouraging alliances, using them to communicate to the other parent, and making negative statements about the other parent to the children. The negative consequences of parental conflict may be attenuated by positive conflict resolution strategies, expression of the conflict, and adjustment of the parents.

“Interparental conflict after divorce (for example, verbal and physical aggression, overt hostility, distrust) and the custodial parent’s emotional distress are jointly predictive of more problematic parent-child relationships and greater child maladjustment.” Generally little change occurs over time in the degree of conflict that parents exhibit to sonality inventories, structured diary records made by the parents, observations of parent-child interactions in the home and in the laboratory, as well as several other measures of child behavior. They also differentiated parent-child conflict, husband-wife conflict, and encapsulated conflict from each other in their analyses. They

found that encapsulated conflict (where children are not exposed to the conflict) did not have negative effects on the children whereas overt parent child or husband-wife conflict did.

Highly conflicted couples are unlikely to become cooperative. When overtly acrimonious marriages end, the children may manifest better levels of psychological adjustment because of their reduced exposure to parental conflict. In an analogous fashion, for children caught in highly conflicted post divorce families, relocation may further lessen their exposure to the parental conflict, thereby reducing the negative consequences of divorce for them. Such children may fare better when no longer entangled in the parental enmity. Precipitating a high conflict relationship with the nonresidential parent is not, however, a recommended tactic for a residential parent wishing to relocate. Low overt conflict between parents is still better for children than high conflict defused only by geographic distance.

C. AGE OF CHILD

Children of different ages have varying developmental levels of cognitive and emotional resources that may influence how they react to parental separation and divorce. While some reports demonstrate that children of particular ages, *e.g.* preschool, are most vulnerable to psychological distress following family dissolution other studies have not found one age group to be more at risk than another. It has been suggested that the effects of age are intertwined with other variables, such as amount of time since parental separation. In terms of most developmental theories, the younger the child the greater the impact that separation may have with regard to the relationship with the non-residential parent. For infants and very young children, the emotional attachment to the noncustodial parent may be tenuous, since it gradually develops over the first few years of life. Although usually one primary attachment figure exists, children develop relationships with a number of caregivers, who are sources of nurturance and safety for them. Separation prior to the consolidation of a parent-child relationship may interfere with the formation of that relationship.

Furthermore, children may be more vulnerable in the face of environmental change during the period when they are exploring their sense of themselves as independent and autonomous (also known as the “terrible two’s”). From a cognitive perspective, infants and very young children do not have the resources to understand the absence of a significant attachment figure, such as a parent. Although they may not be able to verbalize or identify their feelings, they may experience distress.

Preschool children often assume they are to blame for the divorce, relating it to some behavior on their part, such as making too much noise. They may also express fantasies about their parents reuniting, even when their parents were never married or have already re-married. For example, one child wanted to introduce her step-mother and step-father to each other so they would fall in love and then her mother and father would get back together. Moving away from the home community may, on the one hand, feed children’s guilt and blame fantasies, e.g. feeling responsible for the absence of the left-behind parent. Feelings of abandonment may also be part of the moving experience for preschoolers, who cannot understand why the parent left-behind did not move with them. Children of this age are also very literal in their thinking and cannot project what their new life will be like. One three-year old child’s lack of enthusiasm after seeing her new large, but empty, room was clarified when she asked where she was going to sleep. Elementary school-age children are developing interests and activities outside the home and are usually very involved with peer relationships. They are the children who want to keep everything fair and balanced with respect to their parents. For example, they may want to assure that each parent has “equal time” with them, which is not possible, in most cases, and certainly not in relocation cases. In some respects, children of this age group are more vulnerable to the effects of divorce than preschool children because they have a better understanding of the situation but can no longer effectively use fantasy to deny or escape the reality. These children, however, have a better sense of time and continuity and understand that they will continue to see the noncustodial parent.

Pre-adolescents or young adolescents generally have better coping skills than younger children, have established strong peer relationships, and may be more responsive to therapeutic intervention. They are, however, susceptible to loyalty conflicts between the parents and may get caught up in the parents' battles, often siding with the parent they perceive as the weaker or wronged one. Children in this age group, particularly boys, are more likely to express anger or aggressive behavior. They may take a stand for or against the move as a way of supporting one parent. As with all school-age children, leaving friends, activities, and the familiar school are major sources of anxiety, whether the family is intact or one parent is staying behind. Younger and older adolescents may be slower to adjust to the impact of family disruption than younger children. Adolescents possess the cognitive capacity to understand their parents' divergent viewpoints and to appreciate that their parents' failed marriage is not their fault or responsibility. They are, therefore, able to distance themselves from the parental interaction better than younger children. Adolescents are coping with their developmental tasks of identity resolution, independence, and intimacy in relationships. Paradoxically, however, while these tasks ultimately separate them from their parents, they still want and need the family to remain intact during this process. Divorce disrupts the stable family base to which an adolescent can return when he or she needs parental nurturance in order to continue the move toward adulthood. With regard to relocation, adolescents can maintain the relationship with the noncustodial parent on a long distance basis more easily than younger children. Moving to a new school in the middle of high school, however, can significantly increase an adolescents' level of stress and may interfere with integration into that school. In the clinical setting, adolescents frequently resist moving, following the divorce of their parents. In the divorce situation, particularly where relocation is contested, it is very difficult for children of any age to view it in a totally positive frame. Some evidence exists that the acute effects of divorce dissipate and most children and parents adjust after two years. While no empirical evidence directly links the timing of a relocation

to the child's quality of adjustment, one can infer from psychological research and clinical experience that it would be better for the child to adjust to the divorce in a familiar environment, prior to relocation.

D. PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

For the most part, a child who has positive relationships with both parents is likely to be better adjusted than a child who does not. As noted earlier, where the family situation involves severe parental pathology, a history of physical or sexual abuse, or high overt inter parental conflict, children may fare better psychologically when they have a limited or no relationship with that parent. With regard to the relationship between the child and the custodial parent, the research indicates that a positive relationship affects a wide range of variables, such as academic achievement, self-concept, and general psychological adjustment.

E. PARENTAL FUNCTIONING

The residential parent's level of psychological adjustment has been found to be related to the child's adjustment following divorce. The association, however, seems to be a consequence of an overall decrease in the quality of the parent's functioning, which affects childrearing skills along with other functions. The immediate impact of divorce is to increase stress and distress. It is not surprising, therefore, that parental effectiveness is generally lower during this time. A parent who is stressed or depressed, for example, is likely to be less attentive and less sensitive to the needs of the child than a parent who is not depressed. Custodial parents (usually mothers) have been found to be less affectionate with their children and less consistent in their discipline. Poor adolescent functioning was associated with decreased parental functioning and parenting skills. Stressed or depressed mothers were most likely to have disrupted discipline practices and consequently their children would exhibit antisocial behaviors, which would then act as a feedback loop. That is, the poor parental discipline would generate child behavioral problems, which would increase parental stress and depression and perpetuate ineffective

parenting. Parents who are psychologically maladjusted may be at greater risk for divorce and may be more likely to have children who have psychological problems, prior to divorce. The vast majority of studies find support for the association between the psychological well-being and parenting practices of the custodial parent with child adjustment. On the one hand, the different subject populations and different methods for obtaining the data across the various studies limit their comparability. While it is generally assumed that parents who are functioning well are more likely to have better relationships with their children and their children are then likely to show higher levels of adjustment. The children of mothers who were functioning poorly one year after divorce were actually better adjusted than children whose mothers were functioning better. They suggested that mothers who were more stressed may have spent more time with their children, thus serving as a buffer for the children. The circumstances of this particular study may be atypical. Clinical data suggest that many distressed residential parents rely too heavily on their children for support and closeness and are not able to provide the children with the emotional guidance that the children need.

V. CONCLUSION

The psychological issues surrounding the relocation of custodial parents and their children are complex and interdependent. Relocation, following family dissolution, does not occur in a vacuum but rather is associated with other significant life events that may have positive or negative consequences for the family members. Because of the complexities of the variables involved, social science research has not yet been able to identify the contributions of each of the variables in a definitive fashion. Most of the studies can only indicate an association between two variables, not a causal relationship. Studies that specifically address the relationship between relocation following divorce and the adjustment of children are essential, but virtually absent. It is possible to extrapolate from the existing research on geographic mobility and on variables affecting the adjustment of children of

divorce, as well as from clinical experience, the factors most likely to affect children.

A. SIGNIFICANT PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

The following factors have been consistently related to positive child adjustment:

- Positive custodial parent adjustment, which is associated with effective parenting;
- Positive relationship between custodial parent and child;
- Low level of conflict between parents.

In situations where high levels of conflict exist between parents, contact with the noncustodial parent often involves interactions between the hostile parents, thus, increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes for the child. The nature of the pre-divorce relationship between the child and now-nonresidential parent does not predict their post divorce relationship. Frequency of contact with the noncustodial parent does not seem to be related to child wellbeing, but the nature of the contact does. For the most part, mothers tend to be the custodial parents. Despite the inconsistent or absent evidence regarding the benefit of contact with noncustodial fathers, one is reluctant to conclude that custodial mothers should be allowed to relocate without careful consideration of the circumstances in the particular case. The research evidence, as has been noted, may not be applicable to all groups of parents and children.

B. WHEN PARENTS' NEEDS AND CHILDREN'S NEEDS CLASH

The wish to relocate is an example of parental and child needs conflicting with each other. "Both parents should have the right to reorganize their lives, even if this entails moving some distance from the former partner." Despite the difficulty in establishing research support for the advantage of continued contact with the noncustodial parent, that positive relationships with both parents are important to the psychological health of the child. Moreover, the noncustodial parent, who is most often the father, has a right

to have access to his or her children. In a relocation case, the needs of all parties rarely can all be satisfied. Relocation will deprive the child and the noncustodial parent of valuable times together. Prohibiting relocation will deprive the custodial parent of the opportunity to find greater satisfaction in life. Noncustodial parents face no restrictions on relocation, yet we do not know the impact on the child if a noncustodial parent moves away. Research indicates that a distressed parent may not be able to provide adequate parenting and the child's well-being may suffer.

C. SERVING THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD IN RELOCATION CASES

the usual factors considered under the best interests criterion should be applied in relocation cases in the context of whether the move will have a positive impact on the child. Will, for instance, the child's educational opportunities be enhanced in the new environment? Trial court and appellate courts' decisions affirmed permitting mother to relocate approximately 130 kms away. The mother sought permission to relocate because her parents, with whom she and the child resided, were moving to another town.

How can the relocation issue be reconciled with a best interest's standard? First, all the factors must be considered on a case by case basis. Although we have some idea of the importance of various factors, in general, we need to assess them in each situation.

Second, a family systems perspective must be maintained. A parent who believes that his rights or needs are discounted may not be able to parent effectively or encourage the child's relationship with the other parent. While the best interests of the child need to be primary, they will be served if the solution is also in the best interests of the family.

Third, the psychological residue of the relocation issue, regardless of whether it is permitted or blocked, may be considerable. Steps must be taken to minimize the negative impact of either decision. If

relocation is to occur, age-appropriate plans need to be developed for preparing the children for the move. Specific arrangements need to be in place so that the child and the left-behind parent know when and how they will maintain their relationship. If relocation with the children is not allowed to occur, then the custodial parent may need psychological help to deal with the anger, resentment, or depression that may be present. The children, in these situations, often feel a mixture of guilt, anger, and fear, and may need to be helped through this period with their own counseling.

D. CAVEATS AND CONCERNS

While beyond the scope of this article, two additional issues need to be noted when considering relocation issues.

- Since mothers account for about ninety percent of all custodial parents, permitting relocation may be viewed as pro-women, while prohibiting relocation may be viewed as pro-men. It may be tempting to cast relocation as a gender bias issue, thus losing sight of the necessary focus on the psychological well-being of the children and adults involved. Considering each situation according to its own merits may serve to defuse this concern.
- Perhaps the greatest danger to the well-being of children is inherent to the legal system, which allows for appeals and reversals of previous court orders. Children (and adults as well) thrive when their lives are consistent and stable. The threat of being moved from one geographic locale to another because of changing court decisions can disrupt the healthy psychological development of the children. Less adversarial ways of resolving family disputes truly would be in the best interests of the children.
- Trial court granted mother permission to relocate 40 minutes away and modified father's visitation schedule to provide father with liberal visitation. The appellate court reversed the trial court's decision because the move would significantly impact the existing

pattern of care and adversely affect the nature and quality of father's contact with the child. The Supreme Court reversed the court of appeals' decision and ultimately the mother was permitted to relocate.