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# **Communication in Divorced Families with Children: A Review of the Literature**

Casey L. James

Love, hope, children, and security: While not by any means an exhaustive list, these are all reasons people get married. According to the U.S. Census (2012), in the United States 53.9 percent of people were married in 2011. There are many communication strategies that can be used to help a marriage survive and thrive, but what about communication strategies for divorce? According to the American Psychological Association (2016) 40-50 percent of marriages in the US end in divorce (Marriage & divorce, n.d.). When children are not involved, couples have the ability divorce and live separate lives. However, according to the US census in 2011, 41 percent of married couples had at least one child under the age of 18 (Jacobsen, Mather, & Dupuis, 2012, p. 4). When a couple has living minor children, they are often unable to live their lives without needing to communicate with each other after the dissolution of the marriage.

Divorce can have profound and lasting impacts on children. Children of divorced families are not only more likely to be divorced themselves as adults, but are at a higher risk for emotional and physical health problems, peer relational issues, and suicidality (Child and Divorce Statistics, n.d.). A marital status transition “can lead to depression, behavioral problems, poor school performance and separation anxiety” (Portes, Lehman, & Brown, 1999, p. 38). These children “tend to be less self-efficient, have a lower self-esteem and have less effective coping skills (Portes et al., 1999, p. 38). To help reduce the risk of a child becoming a statistic in one of the prior mentioned categories, it is important that the child can adjust to and process the divorce in a healthy and productive manner. There are several key components to this, but many revolve around the parental units and communication. This paper will explore both parent and child communication and co-parent communication.

There are many aspects to communication during and after divorce, and

the small list of various aspects discussed in this paper are not an exhaustive list. First, the different types of family conversation and conformity dyads will be reviewed. Second, the researcher will explore ambiguity and competency in parent-child communications. Next, child adjustment in separations and divorces will be explored. Finally, the researcher will discuss post-divorce communication between the child and both the custodial parent and non-custodial parent, as well as, between the co-parents, and how technology is used in these relationship groups.

### **Method**

Data was pulled from nine studies published in academic journals across the country, as well as, various internet based psychology and census sources. All studies were done within the United States and were primarily in the northern part of America. It is important to note that while some studies had more diverse participant groups, most study samples were primarily Caucasian families with the mother as the custodial parent. Ages of children varied, but the focus was almost exclusively on children under the age of 18. Co-parents within these studies were all biological parents, with second families rarely explored except in terms of peer-to-peer communication. One study included families that were recently separated or in the process of getting divorced, but were not legally divorced yet.

### **Conversation and Conformity Dyads**

Families are made up of a conversation and conformity dyad. Families that highly value communication would be considered as having a high conversation orientation, while those who do not highly value communication would be considered low conversation orientation. According to Schrodt and Skimkowski (2015), “Parents of high conversation oriented families believe in the importance of open communication as a means of teaching and socializing their children” (p. 3). For high conversation oriented families, open dialogue is encouraged and a part of daily life. For low conversation

oriented families, there is less verbal communication back and forth and conversation may only be surface topics. Low conversation families are less likely to discuss topics that revolve around opinions, feelings, and emotions.

The other side of the dyad is conformity orientation, which also comes in both high and low values. High conformity orientation families value “uniformity and obedience” (Schrodt & Skimkowski, 2015, p. 3) more than opinions and personal desires. Schrodt and Skimkowski (2015) state that, high conformity families “tend to have uniform beliefs and values, a hierarchical family structure, and they place family interests before those of individual family members” (p. 3). While high conformity oriented families do not offer much room for individualized growth outside of the family value set, those with low conformity orientation value personal beliefs and interests. These families allow and encourage individual growth without dependence on the family core image or value set, but that is not to say that some family values are not expected to be followed.

These two orientations in their polarities, form four dyads of different family types. Families that are both low conformity and low conversation are laissez-faire families, high conformity and low conversation are protective families, both high conformity and high conversation are consensual families, and low conformity with high conversation are pluralistic families. In the study done by Schrodt and Skimkowski (2015) it was found that “conversation orientation significantly predicted perceptions of both supportive and antagonistic coparental communication” (p. 9). Families with high conversation orientation had healthier coparenting practices. This is in part due to “parents who believe in the value of open and unrestrained interactions on a wide variety of topics may be more likely to support each other, and less likely to compete with each other, in their parenting efforts with the children” (Schrodt & Skimkowski, 2015, p. 9). Regardless of conformity orientation, those

with high conversation orientation, had relationships that were perceived by children as supportive.

However, conformity orientation does still affect the relationship and perceptions of it. “High conformity orientation is likely to impede the ability of parents to resolve conflict and model healthy conflict resolution skills for their children...encourages conflict avoidance in parenting” (Schrodt & Skimkowski, 2015, p. 10). This conflict avoidance may lead to parents either acting as individuals instead of as a coparenting team, or one parent being dominant in making decisions for children even after divorce. Either way, the message and lesson to the child is not healthy communication and may lead to poor coping skills with the divorce and other elements later in life.

Despite the possible negative effects of being conformity oriented, it may be less of a concern if paired with high conversation orientation to form a consensual dyad. Schrodt and Skimkowski (2015) found that “it may matter less to supportive coparenting practices if parents have established a relatively strong conversation orientation within the family” (p. 9). While children in protective families may have a hard time adjusting to divorced life in terms of stress and communication, pluralistic families will struggle as both parents feel free to set the terms that they feel are important. Unless both parents openly communicate about rules and expectations with one another, and not just with the children, this family type could send mixed messages to children. Consensual families can rely on their conversation orientation to coparent and relay the same expectations to children within households that value obedience and family values.

### **Ambiguity and Competency in Parent-Child Communication**

One who is communication competent possess the ability to effectively communicate the desired message in an appropriate way for the receiver to understand. Being competent in communication has both potential positive

and negative effects on the parent child relationship. McManus and Donovan (2012) found that “openness contributed to cohesive, healthy functioning post-divorce families” (p. 269). However, if parents withhold information or are perceived as doing such, it negatively affected the relationship between that parent and the child. McManus and Donovan (2012) state that “when parents were viewed as more communicatively competent, parents’ ambiguity had greater effects on young adults’ psychological well-being” (p. 269). This is especially important since children may expect parents to possess this competency due to experience over life, despite this topic being different than most conversations, and may misjudge ambiguity as deliberate withholding.

While being ambiguous can be harmful, children may feel trapped or caught with parents who are not as competent or are intentionally manipulative. Feeling caught is the “experience of triangulation arising from when parents involve children in their disputes, request that the child take sides, mediate the conflict” (McManus & Donovan, 2012, p. 260), or even relay messages back between parental parties. When children feel, manipulated or like they are caught in the middle of fighting parents, there are negative effects on the child psychologically. Communicating about divorce stress is healthy, unless it negatively affects the child’s relationship with either parent, or has a negative effect on the child’s own coping skills. In essence, it may not only be how you say something, but what you are saying. An inability to communicate about divorce stress, mixed with direct conflict avoidance may be a trait that is found in low conversational families that are experiencing the sudden power dynamic change.

While young children may not be able to read parental conflict as easily, Portes, Lehman, and Brown (1999) state that an adolescent child’s “ability to rationalize and understand may prove detrimental to the adolescents involved” (p. 38), as they are gaining the ability to “see when they are being

manipulated by their parents, which may increase their anxiety and levels of frustration and anger with their parents” (p. 38). This realization forces children into a state of feeling caught, which can be detrimental to their psyche.

### **Child Adjustment in Marital Transitions**

Divorce does not always have long term negative effects on children and family units, but in Linker, Stolberg, and Green (1999) state that as of 1991, “approximately one-sixth of children from divorced families experience long-term adjustment problems” (p. 84). For children with high conversational oriented families, or a high conversational custodial parent, divorce can help them develop the ability to problem-solve, cope with stress, and adjust to adverse situations. Afifi, Huber, and Ohs (2006), state that “the amount of affection and empathy a parent communicates to a child when the child is talking about his/her stress could promote a climate of acceptance and openness about the stress and, thus, contribute to his/her ability to cope with it” (p. 3). Including children in family communication and helping them determine what is stressful for them and how they feel they should deal with it can have lasting effects.

For many children, the divorce will have negative effects, even if briefly. Children who do not adjust well may exhibit behavioral problems, suffer from depression, develop emotional problems like low self-esteem, and have poor coping skills to use later in life. Child maladjustment has several variables, but 23% are related to “social support, residential and non-residential parent-child relationships, and interparental conflict” (Linker, Stolberg, & Green, 1999, p. 84). According to Afifi, Huber, and Ohs (2006), “substantial changes in custodial parent-child interactions often occur after divorce and that many of them are detrimental to the child...at least in the initial years” (p. 4). Children will need some information about the divorce, but it is always important to help them understand this information and process it in a way that is best

for them, instead of telling them how to process it.

In divorce families will often experience changes in communication, changes in amount of physical time spent together between parental units and children, changes in family roles and the types of duties that each party is responsible for, and possible co-parent conflict. According to Linker, Stolberg, and Green (1999), parental conflict has “one of the most influential effects” (p. 85), which can be made worse when “altered communication patters makes co-parenting tasks more challenging and less efficient” (p. 86). Even in families with high conversational orientation, daily life may not be discussed even though major choices are available. This challenge is exhibited more strongly with the noncustodial or nonresidential parent.

### **Post-Divorce-Parent-Child Communication and Technology**

For parents who are not the custodial or residential parents, time with children is cut substantially. While more families are doing equal joint physical custody today, it was not always the norm and in many cases still is not possible. Some parents have jobs that require the following: travel or be deployed; some jobs may result in a parent living a long distance from children; some parents may be incarcerated or have other court related orders restricting physical visitation time with the children; some parents may not wish to reach out to their children, etc. To this day when there is a non-custodial parent, it is often the father, thus most of the research discussed was done with a non – custodial parent family type.

Non-custodial parents often miss-out on the day to day life of their children. While it may seem menial, research has found that “relationships are maintained (or “talked into being”) through regular talk and interaction, both the strategic and the mundane” (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 1135). Some non-custodial parents are fortunate enough to have a good co-parenting relationship with their ex and be geographically located closely, with a job that allows the time and income, to see

their children on days that are not their assigned days. These parents can attend sporting events, artistic and academic events, and interact with the children on a more regular basis than those who either do not have a good relationship with their ex or are not geographically located where they can increase physical visits to their children.

Due to non-custodial parents, not being as present as custodial parents, others mean can be used to communicate regularly, often technology based means. Parents can use the telephone or internet to communicate with children. For some the internet may be skype, email, or chat. Since non-custodial parents tend to feel like that they “miss out on the basic, mundane details of their children’s lives” (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 1141), using technology to communicate can ease this feeling. This may require more prompting than normal for a conversation, as children may be more apt to share details that they feel are significant, while not sharing the rest of the day.

One participant in Rodriguez’s (2014) study said, “It’s always going to be fragmented...we’ll only see parts of each other’s lives” (p. 1141). While technology can assist in communication it can never replace face-to-face interactions. There is also the chance that the other parent will not allow communication during their visitation times. Sadly, for these situations, there is nothing that the other parent can do until the child is old enough to make their own decisions. If possible, parents should try to work together to allow for both parents to attend special events for children and to communicate regularly with the children when not physically present for extended times.

### **Divorced Co-Parenting Relationships and Communication**

Co-parents can also use technology to communicate efficiently and effectively with one another. “One of the most important challenges in post-divorce families is maintain positive coparental relationships...requiring communication between ex-partners who may have contentious relationships” (Ganong,

Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, & Markham, 2012, p. 397). One way to do this is by using technology. When a quick question is being asked, and will not have a detailed answer a phone call may be sufficient. However, if the response is going to be detailed a text may be more beneficial.

One thing for co-parents to keep in mind when using technology, especially the phone or text, is that constant contact may come across as harassment or crossing a line. Technology can be very beneficial, but it can also be used to control and manipulate the other parents, which can further deteriorate a fragile relationship. When the parents do not have a good relationship, the phone can “disintegrate into arguments about on-going disagreements and rehashing of past issues” (Ganong et al., 2012, p. 399). However, if used to focus on the children’s needs the phone can be very effective for fast communication.

In relationships that are less amicable, email may be a better use of technology. According to Ganong, Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, and Markham, (2012), “emails can be sent without fear of engaging the other parents in unwanted conversation” (p. 399) and allow a record of any details shared and agreed upon, and can be less emotionally charged. Using phone conversations, once something is said it is out there, and texts are often sent in the heat of the moment and can be too emotionally charge. Using emails, the sender is more likely to edit the content and use the medium to try to defuse the situation or reduce the likelihood of conflict. Email is also a useful tool for those who need to convey detailed information regardless of the state of the relationship, and at times a shared family calendar can relay a lot of this information for families with multiple children with schedule commitments.

When communication breaks down to a point that it is affecting the children, it is time for the parents to consider enlisting the help of a professional. One such type of professional help is mediation. Mediation can take place during or after divorce. According to Gentry (1997), “children must feel secure and

empowered to share their observations, thoughts, wants, and feelings relative to their parent’ divorce” (p. 316). In Gentry’s study two games were used, Life Stories and Future Stories, both of which are similar in nature and helped keep the children from being bored while disclosing similar information to each parent separately.

For the family discussed the major areas of contentment were, “time spent with the children, supervision of the children when a caregiving parent had to be absent, and behaviors when communicating with each other about the children’s welfare” (Gentry, 1997, p. 318). Before the games were used in mediation, the parents agreed to not make the children feel caught between them and that they would not be making the final discussion regarding any of the concerns. During the games the parents realized that the children loved both and wanted to spend time with each, that they were not in denial about the divorce, and had many good memories as a family, but were optimistic that their parents would navigate their relationship better in the future (Gentry, 1997, p. 320). Since there were no red flags that the helper felt would result in the children being at risk, the games were used and effective in navigating the families conflict areas, even after divorce.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the increase in families that are partaking in more even joint custody, there are still challenges faced by these families. Communication between the co-parents and individual parent units and children are important. Divorce will be an adjustment for the entire family, and may be especially hard on children, but having a healthy relationship with the parents can make all the difference. Even having a healthy relationship with one parents can have a profound impact on the child’s coping abilities and ability to adjust in a healthy manner.

A major component in a healthy relationship for the children is open and honest communication. However, parents should not use the children as an outlet for their stress and

frustrations, which could result in over sharing and the child feeling caught between sides. One influential area for child adjustment is the dynamics of the co-parental relationship. If the co-parents can maintain a healthy relationship amongst themselves and communicate effectively between each other, this can be perceived as a good relationship model for children and reduce the stress that children experience.

In addition to working out a good relationship between ex-partners, a good relationship between the child and both the custodial and non-custodial parent should be attempted. For the custodial parent this is easier to do through daily maintenance communication than for the non-custodial parent. The non-custodial parent may need to use technology to strengthen their relationship maintenance with children, something that can only be attained with the cooperation of the custodial parent's cooperation. In addition, learning to be a high conversational oriented family, if not already one, may be profoundly beneficial.

Practicing open dialogue between the co-parents and the parent and children will allow for more topics to be discussed in more depth. Further, surface conversation may be able to maintain a relationship with the non-custodial parent, but this limited conversation with the custodial parent may be detrimental to the child's social and coping skills, which can increase the chances of prolonged low self-esteem. Additionally, families that are consensual seem to have the easiest time in having open communication without sending too many mixed signals on what rules and values are important. If the current family type is *liaise-faire*, learning to adjust to pluralistic will increase the chances of a child adjusting in a healthy manner.

When one parent cannot be present often, regardless of reason, the use of technology can be a very effective way to maintain communication with children. In addition to maintaining a relationship with a child with extended periods of absence,

technology can also be used for co-parenting in any situation. Technology can make it easier to coordinate a child's schedule, to share important information, and to converse in a manner that is easier to control. Using technology to communicate between co-parents can also have its drawbacks and parents need to be careful not to fall into those patterns.

It may be easy to react to a text in an emotional manner, without taking the time to calm down after an initial interpretation of the message. If one remembers to take a step back and calm down, they may find that they misunderstood the message or inflected their current emotional state onto the message without realizing it. In addition, phone calls and text messages can be used to harass the other co-parent and it's important to ensure that you are not doing this, intentionally or not. When records are needed, either for court or due to a forgetful parent, email may be the best solution. Email is also a good solution for co-parents who are having a harder time communication in a non-hostile manner.

In addition to these options, having a family calendar, such as Google calendar or Cozi, may prove beneficial and help keep everyone more in tune to upcoming events and activities for the children. Divorce can have both negative and positive effects on the family, and even if negative effects are present at first, they may ease with time. It is never the child's job to help the parent cope or be their emotional punching bag. While open dialogue is important, it should be limited to what the child can process, without intentionally withholding or being ambiguous, and should never be used to belittle or degrade the other parent.

It is the parent's responsibility to foster an environment to make the transition as easy as possible for the children. It is the parent's responsibility to maintain a healthy relationship with the children and to provide a chance for the other parent to do the same. It is the responsibility of the co-parents to work together as a team for the benefit of the



children. Children can learn to be independent, to cope with stress, to be proficient with interpersonal communication, to see that two people can who are different can work together in a peaceful manner, and so much more.

Children can be severely affected by divorce, but they don't need to. Tools are available today to help facilitate a healthy environment and relationships for divorced families. At the end of the day, the co-parents have a chance to teach children the skills that will help them function better as adults. It is the responsibility of the parents to protect their children, while helping them grow. To allow children to express themselves and learn to grieve and cope with stress in a healthy manner. At the end of the day, the co-parents control so much of this in how they communicate with one another and the child. It's about high conversational orientation, without over-sharing or ambiguity. It's about learning to love a new way.

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