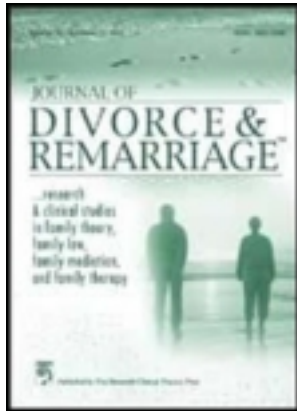


This article was downloaded by: [University of Minnesota Libraries, Twin Cities]

On: 12 October 2012, At: 18:40

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Divorce & Remarriage

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjdr20>

### Internal Working Models of Attachment and Postdivorce Coparent Relationships

Patricia N. E. Roberson<sup>a</sup>, Melissa Sabo<sup>a</sup> & Katharine Wickel<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Marriage and Family Therapy Program, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Purdue University Calumet, Hammond, Indiana, USA

Version of record first published: 20 Apr 2011.

To cite this article: Patricia N. E. Roberson, Melissa Sabo & Katharine Wickel (2011): Internal Working Models of Attachment and Postdivorce Coparent Relationships, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 52:3, 187-201

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2011.569442>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## **Internal Working Models of Attachment and Postdivorce Coparent Relationships**

PATRICIA N. E. ROBERSON, MELISSA SABO,  
and KATHARINE WICKEL

*Marriage and Family Therapy Program, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Purdue University Calumet, Hammond, Indiana, USA*

*Stable coparenting relationships postdivorce have been shown to combat the negative effects on child development. There are three types of coparental relationships postdivorce: stable, conflicted and cut off. Each type of interaction has different effects on the children and other family members, with the stable coparent relationship being the most functional. Attachment theory explains the differences between the coparenting styles. Individuals in stable coparent relationships are more likely to have a secure internal working model; conflicted coparents are more likely to have an anxious-ambivalent internal working model; and disengaged coparents are more likely to have an avoidant internal working model.*

**KEYWORDS** *coparenting, adult attachment, divorce*

Over the past decades, the American family has changed in organization, size, and definition. Since the 1950s, the rate of divorce has increased from 11% to between 40% and 50% for first marriages and even higher for subsequent marriages (Divorce Statistics, 2007) thus warranting the attention of research and mental health professionals. Many researchers and the popular media have painted a dim view of the state of American families by highlighting the negative effects of the increased rate of divorce. Divorce is ranked at the top of the list of stressful life events and it affects all members of the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Kelly (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of divorce on children and concluded that children of divorce

---

All authors contributed equally.

Address correspondence to Patricia N. E. Roberson, 701 N. Indian River Drive, Unit 105, Fort Pierce, FL 34950, USA. E-mail: pneroberson@gmail.com

are more likely to suffer from economic, social, and health difficulties; more than twice as likely to drop out of school; and more likely themselves to divorce.

Despite these reports, researchers have indicated that the main source of parental and child maladjustment is due to the level of conflict between the parents and not to the act of divorce (Hetherington, 1982). Other studies indicate that children fare better when divorced parents do not triangulate their children into the relationship and are able to maintain a cooperative coparental relationship (Minuchin, 1974). Some parents avoid divorce for fear of causing irreparable emotional damages. However, remaining in a conflictual marriage has been shown to cause more harm to children than a stable and cooperative parental divorce relationship (Hetherington, 1999). Parents have unique challenges to navigate on divorcing, as "Marital separation and divorce result in ironic circumstances where the emotional withdrawal of the marital partner, the necessary changes in family structure, and the required redefinition of spousal and parental roles often highlight the loss of the attachment relationship with the former spouse, triggering an attachment response" (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999, p. 243).

Three categories of postseparation coparenting styles are evident in the literature: stable, conflicted, and disengaged. Stable coparenting has been shown to be the most beneficial coparenting style, whereas conflictual and disengaged parenting styles have been shown to have more detrimental effects on all individuals in the family (Baum, 2004). Researchers have found that children and coparents are at greater risk for emotional harm when separated coparents are highly conflictual (Kelly, 1998, 2000; Garber, 2001; Hetherington, 1982). This research suggests that the quality of the coparental relationship dictates positive child and parent outcome rather than the actual structure of the family (Ahrons & Miller, 1993; Jacobs, 1982).

Internal working models of attachment styles are formed in early parent-child relationships and continue through the life span relatively unchanged (Fraley, 2002). Research on adult romantic attachment styles describes three types of relationships: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. In stressful situations, attachment systems activate and individuals employ stereotypic attachment behaviors consistent with their attachment style (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Relevant to coparental relationships postdivorce, attachment styles organize how divorced partners cope with the loss of the ex-spouse and resolve coparenting challenges regarding their children. The authors delineate a connection between internal working models of attachment and coparent relationship styles: Individuals in stable coparent relationships are more likely to have a secure internal working model; conflicted coparents are more likely to have an anxious-ambivalent internal working model; and disengaged coparents are more likely to have an avoidant internal working model.

## COPARENTING STYLES

Coparenting is defined as the divorced parents' ability to work with each other in determining the needs of their children. Divorce and coparenting literature describes coparenting styles that can be categorized into three types: stable, conflicted, and disengaged (Ahrns, 1995; Baum, 2004; Kruk, 1993). Each style has distinct characteristics that define behaviors and relationships between parents and their children.

### Stable Coparent Relationship

Stable coparenting is characterized by both parents working together in a harmonious fashion to parent their children (Kruk, 1993). This style depends on the ability of each parent to differentiate his or her previous roles of romantic partner from the current role as coparent (Ahrns, 1995). Often this starts with parents setting aside their differences to give the appearance of cohesiveness to their children. With time, these seemingly false interactions become a pattern of functioning that enables both parents to work together in parenting their children (Kruk, 1993). Ahrns stated that although 50% of coparents end up in stable coparent relationship, they do not always begin that way. Behaviors common in stable coparenting patterns include consistent discipline between coparenting households (McIntosh, 2003), emotional availability of both parents for their children (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006), good communication between coparents (Kruk), and flexible and clear boundaries (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Kruk). Children whose parents have a stable coparenting relationship fare better than those in which there is parental conflict. Research shows that parental acceptance, in the form of warmth, concern, caring, and consistent discipline, acts as a buffer against the stressors placed on children during divorce (Hetherington, 1982; Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). A stable coparent relationship, because of its positive effects, should be the goal of postdivorce therapy and coparenting interventions.

### Conflicted Coparent Relationship

Another style of coparenting is the conflicted type, which can be characterized by high amounts of anger and distrust, verbal abuse, and physical aggression between the parents that affects all relationships in the family (Ahrns, 1995; McIntosh, 2003). Due to the volatile nature of the coparent relationship, communication about children and establishment of a stable home environment is difficult. Sometimes the behaviors of conflicted parents can lead to triangulation of the children into the coparent relationship (McIntosh). Conflicted relationships between ex-partners can lead to emotional unavailability to children and inconsistent discipline (Sturge-Apple

et al., 2006). According to research, the developmental tasks most likely to be affected by stress due to a conflicted coparenting style are the development of attachment, understanding of cause and effect, regulation of affect, internalized beliefs about oneself, peer relationships, and academic achievement (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001). The conflictual relationship also affects the psychological and emotional status of coparents. This model of coparenting is often the result of the inability to redefine their role as parents. Often these adults have a difficult time mourning the loss of the spouse and redefining themselves in the parental role because of the inability to separate their spousal role from their parental role (Baum, 2004).

### Disengaged Coparent Relationship

Like conflicted coparents, disengaged parents also tend to link their children and their ex-spouse as a single entity. However, rather than engaging in conflict, one or both cut off from the other coparent due to the inability to cope with the emotional pain related to the divorce. Often the noncustodial parent finds interaction with his or her children difficult because negative feelings might be evoked about his or her ex-partner. Disengaged coparenting can follow a period of conflicted coparenting if the conflict has reached such a level that one spouse decides he or she cannot tolerate any more conflict (Baum, 2006). Sometimes conflict is the manifestation of a need for spouses to remain entwined in a quasi-spousal relationship. Disengagement might happen when one spouse can redefine his or her role solely to parenting and the other cannot. In short, one parent cannot handle conflict anymore and separates himself or herself from the spousal relationship by redefining his or her role. Other causes of disengagement include interpersonal reasons such as rejection by children, ex-spouse causing strain in parent-child relationship, geographic location, and dissatisfaction with visitation experiences (Baum, 2006). In extreme cases, a disengaged coparent relationship can be caused by a history of criminality, abuse, or insanity (Ahrns, 1995). Disengagement can result from the conflicted style of coparenting and the effects on the children from disengaged coparental families are similar to those of the conflicted style. As stated earlier, the most noted effects would include attachment styles, internalized beliefs about oneself, peer relationships, and academic achievement (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001).

## ATTACHMENT

### Parent-Child Attachment Background

Much of adult romantic attachment research stems from Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Bowlby's (1969) research on parent-child relationships. Based on observations of infant monkeys, Bowlby proposed that infants possess a complex attachment behavioral system for regulating proximity to caregivers

for evolutionary purposes. When these caregivers, or attachment figures, are constantly available and responsive to the infant's needs, the infant feels secure and explores the surrounding environment. These children subtly maintain a level of contact with the attachment figure by glancing back or making vocalizations. Conversely, Bowlby (1969) observed that when an infant is uncertain of the attachment figure's availability, the child experiences anxiety. The child still seeks to remain in contact with the attachment figure but does so through more drastic means such as crying, searching, or clinging. Bowlby termed all contact-seeking behavior as attachment behavior and stated that these behaviors are adapted based on the availability of the caregiver.

As the child adapts attachment behaviors to the caregiver's level of availability and responsiveness, the infant develops an internal working model to help predict caregiver behaviors and shape the patterns of attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Often in the literature the terms *internal working models* and *attachment styles* are used interchangeably (Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Internal working models are unobservable patterns of attachment. However, Ainsworth et al. (1978) organized the observable attachment behaviors into attachment styles and explained that attachment behaviors vary along two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance.

The dimension of anxiety captures the child's fear of abandonment and avoidance captures the child's comfort with depending on an attachment figure for protection. Based on these two dimensions, three attachment styles emerge. One, secure attachment style, is attributed to the child when a low score on the two dimensions is achieved. The secure child exhibits attachment behaviors that appear confident about the availability of the caregiver and seek comfort from the caregiver when distressed (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children that are high in the avoidance dimension and low or high in the anxiety dimension are labeled as having avoidant attachment. These children are unlikely to seek the comfort and care of the caregiver when they are distressed (Ainsworth et al.). Children with avoidant attachment styles are also unlikely to rely on their caregiver for a secure base and value autonomy more than other children and their behaviors are termed as detached (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, 1988). Children classified as anxious-ambivalent are high in anxiety and low in avoidant dimensions and exhibit greater vigilance as to the whereabouts of their caregiver. Protesting for an extended period of time is a common attachment behavior when separated from their caregiver (Ainsworth et al.; Bowlby, 1973). However, on reuniting with the caregiver, children with an anxious-ambivalent style display a mixture of anger and desire for comfort (Ainsworth et al.).

### Adult Attachment Styles

Attachment, although most often known for explaining parent-child relationships, is an important aspect of human interaction throughout the life span

(Bowlby, 1979). Adult attachment behaviors in romantic relationships are similar in many respects to infant–caregiver attachment behavior (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). First, adult intimate relationships are classified into Ainsworth et al.’s (1978) three attachment styles and similarly scaled along anxiety and avoidant dimensions. Second, attachment behaviors are often only enacted when the threats to the stability of the relationship are imminent. Third, internal working models of self and relationships are interrelated and manifest differently across attachment styles.

#### INTERNAL WORKING MODELS AND ATTACHMENT BEHAVIORS

Adults with secure attachment internal working models describe their more important love relationship as happy, friendly, as well as having greater longevity and greater interdependence (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As a reflection of the internal working models, Hazan and Shaver reported that securely attached adults believe that romantic feelings can grow and diminish in intensity through a relationship but in some relationships never fade. Overall, securely attached adults tend to be more satisfied with their relationships and hold a more positive view of themselves and others than their insecure counterparts (Bartholomew, 1990; Feeney et al., 1994).

The two internal working models of insecure attachment in adult romantic relationships are avoidant and anxious-ambivalent. Individuals with avoidant internal working models describe “fear of intimacy, emotional highs and lows, and jealousy” as part of romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515). Congruent with fear of intimacy, individuals with avoidant internal working models indicate that head-over-heels romantic love does not exist and if someone does find a partner, the romantic love rarely lasts (Hazan & Shaver). Adults with anxious-ambivalent attachment characterize romantic love relationships as “involving obsession, desire for reciprocation and union, extreme emotional highs and lows, and extreme sexual attraction and jealousy” (Hazan & Shaver, p. 515). These individuals often find themselves falling for a partner very quickly; however, they do not classify their relationships as real love (Hazan & Shaver).

Similar to infant–caregiver attachment, attachment behaviors are enacted when the threats to the stability of the relationship are imminent. The attachment behaviors are a function of keeping the partner near or preventing them from leaving. Attachment behaviors are activated in three situations (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). First, during fearful or fear-provoking situations, individuals will seek partners as a safe haven (secure base). Second, challenging situations will lead individuals to contact their partner in some way. Third, conflictual interactions will activate attachment behaviors highlighting the importance of cooperative partnerships (Kobak & Duemmler).

A person's adult style of romantic attachment is also affected by attachment history (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Variations in early interactions with caregiver produce enduring differences in adult attachment styles. The internal working models that evolve at a young age frame how people view themselves and relationships and allow for individuals to predict actions of others whether correct or incorrect (Bowlby, 1973). All relationships are different and interactions between a dyad are stereotypic. However, an individual's attachment style is likely to remain stable through the life span due to the persistence of the internal working models (Fraley, 2002). This internal working model is able to predict an individual's concept of self and quality of intimate relationships. Noting the importance of internal working models and environmental forces that affect them, expert and parent must look to how postdivorce relationships affect their children's attachment. Additionally, coparents and experts can look to how current relationships are affected by personal internal working models.

### COPARENTING AND ADULT ATTACHMENT BEHAVIORS

Attachment systems are activated in adults, like in infants, as an attempt to both gain the attention of their partner and attain proximity to their partner in times of stress (Shaver et al., 1988). Attachment behavior is also engaged in times when the stability of the relationship is threatened, such as divorce (Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Even though partners are divorced, divorcing, or separated, their attachment styles and patterns of behavior toward one another make redefinition of roles as coparents and not as romantic partners difficult. In other words, internal working models drive coparents to interact with one another even if that means that they do so in maladaptive ways. Attachment styles influence the partner's ability to cope with the absence of the ex-spouse and the ability to effectively problem solve about their children. The authors theorize that individuals with secure attachment are more likely to engage in stable coparenting behavior; that individuals with anxious-ambivalent attachment are more likely to engage in conflictual coparenting behavior; and that individuals with avoidant attachment are more likely to engage in disengaged coparenting behavior.

#### Coping With Absence-Presence

Grieving the loss of a spouse via death is a difficult process. However, death is terminal, unlike the divorce process. Ex-spouses, especially when the former spouses have children, are continually present in the lives of one another, which can make the grieving process more challenging. This difficult process of mourning the loss of a romantic attachment figure, while interacting with that individual regarding parenting issues, is termed



“absence-presence” (Baum, 2004, p. 317). One of the challenges of divorce is the redefinition of roles after separation. The ability to establish a postdivorce achieved identity is made especially difficult because of the presence of the former spouse and thus a reminder of the former spousal identity (Baum, 2004).

Being unable to build a new postdivorce identity makes coping with the crisis of divorce complicated (Baum, 2004). Conflict in the coparental relationship serves as a reminder of the formal spousal role, thus activating a flood of negative and painful memories. A securely attached person who experiences absence-presence is able to mitigate stress by employing internal coping resources, such as the ability to seek social support. However, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles become overwhelmed with the stress of divorce because they tend to adapt ineffective coping strategies that hinder the grieving process (Mikulincer & Florian, 1996; Vareschi & Bursik, 2005).

## Conflict

According to Hazan and Shaver (1997), conflictual dynamics reflect an operation of the attachment system and functions to keep partners in close proximity. In an attempt to remain close, some couples might create conflict. Conflict in marriage and divorce is a form of communication and an expression of emotional dependency (Bader & Pearson, 1988; Emery, 1994; Weiss, 1976). As it pertains to coparenting, the manner in which ex-spouses manage the differences that are inevitable in childrearing is a reflection of their attachment styles. Stable coparents are able to efficiently negotiate and problem-solve when disagreements arise regarding their children and show more characteristics of secure attachment. Partners in conflicted coparent relationships are unable to cope effectively with the loss of the romantic partner and seek to remain close through conflict. The behavioral patterns of conflicted coparents demonstrate many characteristics of anxious-ambivalent attachment styles. Disengaged coparents additionally are unable to cope efficiently with the loss of the ex-spouse but choose to cut off from interaction, displaying characteristics of avoidant attachment styles.

## Stable Coparent Relationship and Secure Attachment

Individuals in stable coparent relationships show more characteristics of secure internal working models. Direct and open communication is characteristic of securely attached individuals and stable coparent relationships. Consistent parenting between ex-spouses, knowledge of expectations from one another, and the regular flow of information regarding the children are products of open and direct communication. These ex-spouses are able to see one another's viewpoints, thus enabling disagreements to be more

“constructive and coherent” and less disruptive and emotionally damaging (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996, p. 901).

Individuals with secure internal working models are overall more confident in the long-term availability of their partner and other attachment figures (Simpson et al., 1996). The authors hypothesize that long-term availability enables each partner to invest more into the relationship, trusting that the coparent will consistently be there to support them as parents and will be more likely to contribute to a stable environment for their children. Additionally, individuals with secure attachment styles are characterized as having a more positive view of themselves and others (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The positive view of others will allow one parent to trust the other’s parenting skills and decisions regarding childrearing. When faced with conflict, individuals with secure attachment styles are more constructive and proactive in achieving a resolution than their less secure peers (Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Pistole, 1989). Thus, coparents with secure internal working models are able to have more stable coparental relationships.

### Conflicted Coparent Relationship and Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

Conflicted coparents are highly volatile and are unable to separate the roles of spouse and parent, thus, they are unable to cope with absence-presence (Baum, 2004; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Anxious-ambivalent individuals’ attachment systems have been shown to activate more readily and strongly than those with other attachment styles, particularly in times of conflict (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). This would mean that they are more likely to continually engage in conflict with their coparent. Attachment behaviors of anxious-ambivalent individuals are characterized by anger, anxiety, and hostility (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Conflict among individuals with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles appears to be a cyclical process. The conflict of divorce causes stress in the coparental dyad, thus activating the attachment system. Attachment behaviors are then triggered and serve to keep the former romantic partner close, which causes more conflict in an attempt to keep the former romantic partner close (Baum, 2004; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). When attempting to resolve a major disagreement, anxious-ambivalent adults tend to show more anger and anxiety overall than do those with other forms of attachment styles. This causes the nature of conflict to be more negative and result in poor or ineffective outcomes (Simpson et al., 1996). Seemingly, individuals with anxious-ambivalent internal working models will have a propensity to engage in conflicted coparent relationships.

## Disengaged Coparent Relationships and Avoidant Attachment

Avoidant individuals tend to have a bleak outlook of achieving intimacy with partners (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Individuals who are highly avoidant divert their emotional attention away from conflict and other attachment-related situations in an attempt to reduce anxiety. These attachment behaviors result in less warmth and supportiveness toward the coparent, which causes less positive and constructive interactions. Additionally, individuals with avoidant attachment styles do not perceive their coparental partners as available and supportive. This leads to their assumption that attempts to increase levels of constructive interaction would be ineffective (Simpson et al., 1996). Coparents who have avoidant internal working models are more likely to have a disengaged coparent relationship.

### THERAPEUTIC APPLICATION

Seeing coparents in therapy can be very difficult for the therapist due to the simultaneous need to attend to the intense emotions associated with the divorce process and the need to establish a stable environment for the children at home. For this reason the authors have developed a dual-phase therapeutic model that consists of individual sessions focusing on emotional needs and joint coparenting sessions focusing on environmental stability and effective communication.

Coparents will move between the phases as particular life events arise. The therapist, as a secure base, must be sensitively attuned to clients' emotional needs and readiness to progress to the next phase or return to the previous phase. The movement between the phases should not be interpreted as regression but as the coparents' ability to explore and progress through new challenges as coparents.

#### Phase I

The primary objective of Phase I is to promote emotional safety for both ex-partners and for their families. The therapist creates an emotionally safe environment inside and outside the therapy room by being sensitive to the clients in individual therapy sessions and implementing effective coparenting strategies in the joint coparenting therapy session.

Bowlby (1988) identified the importance of the therapist–client interaction being a securely attached relationship. As the client and therapist develop a close working relationship in the individual sessions, the client becomes more securely attached to the therapist, who is acting as a secure base. Trust and security can be achieved by the therapist's empathetic statements, reflective listening, and maintenance of a nonjudgmental stance.

As this becomes established, the client is then able to explore his or her environment and past relationships mirroring that of a secure parent–child attachment (Borelli & David, 2004). This model works most efficiently when each parent works with the therapist on an individual basis to ensure a secure attachment (Hughes, 2007). Once the therapist and client have established a securely attached relationship, the hope is that this relationship style will be replicated in other relationships, such as parent–child, romantic, and family of origin relationships.

The second aspect of Phase I is creating an emotionally safe coparenting environment by implementing coparenting strategies that lessen the anxieties outside the therapy room. While the individuals are working on securely attaching to the therapist, they must still work together to coparent their children. This is most effective if the therapist encourages a business-like relationship. Joint coparenting sessions focus on effective coparenting strategies brought about by behavior modification. These sessions are primarily therapist directed to disrupt the coparents' current ineffective communication pattern, which might include developing a parenting time calendar, psychoeducation about divorce and coparenting, and establishing consistent rules and consequences for the children between the households. In some highly conflictual or disengaged couples, the therapist might need to enlist the help of a guardian ad litem or parenting time coordinator.

## Phase II

The main focus of Phase II is for the individual clients to establish new coparenting roles and for the coparents to take on the responsibility of problem solving and effective communication regarding their children.

Once a secure base has been established between therapist and client, the individual sessions in Phase II can focus on the grieving process and exploring new roles. The divorce grieving process parallels that of the death of a significant person except this involves the loss of a significant relationship. Baum (2006) stated the individuals have a difficult time grieving through divorce and establishing a cooperative coparenting relationship due to their inability to cope with absence–presence and establish new parenting roles. In individual sessions, the therapist and client discuss the divorce grieving process and explore the primary emotions associated with this process. Once the client has reached acceptance, he or she can more effectively cope with absence–presence and establish new parenting roles that are differentiated from the spousal role.

Joint coparenting sessions in Phase II define a process of moving away from therapist-directed interactions and toward client-directed problem solving. Coparents must work on effectively communicating about parenting issues including but not limited to children's education, health, and discipline. The therapist's role in this phase is to act as a mediator between

the clients. When discussion becomes too tense and the coparents begin to reenact their previous conflictual communication pattern, the therapist must intervene and help the coparents reestablish an effective communication pattern. The therapist can further enhance coparents' communication by teaching conflict resolution skills such as reflective listening, compromise, and "I" statements.

## CONCLUSION

Individual internal working models of attachment, as stated earlier, have a significant influence on the ex-spouses' ability to cooperatively coparent their children. More than the act of divorce, the ability of parents, both married and divorced, to attain a stable coparenting relationship with limited conflict affects the well-being of their children. Unique to this evaluation of the literature, we note a distinct connection between the three attachment styles and the three types of coparenting relationships postdivorce: Individuals in stable coparent relationships are more likely to have a secure internal working model; conflicted coparents are more likely to have an anxious-ambivalent internal working model; and disengaged coparents are more likely to have an avoidant internal working model.

Additionally, based on the literature on child outcome, postdivorce children will fare better with parents in a stable coparent relationship. Conversely, children with parents engaged in conflicted or disengaged coparent relationships will have a higher probability to misadjust postdivorce. These children will be more likely to show the characteristics put forth by Kelly's (2000) meta-analysis of the effects of divorce on children postdivorce including that children of divorce are more likely to suffer from economic, social, and health difficulties; more than twice as likely to drop out of school; and more likely themselves to divorce.

Public policy, the judicial system, and the public at large are becoming more aware of both the effects of divorce and the methods to counteract those effects. More families are attending therapy or mediation either due to being mandated by a larger system or voluntarily seeking assistance. With their expert knowledge in relational theories and child development, marriage and family therapists are in a distinctive position to help in understanding the needs of the families that are now seeking assistance. Therefore, it has become imperative for marriage and family therapists to seek out new techniques and use existing theories in unique applications to work with coparents postdivorce. The combination of attachment theory and coparent relationships in postdivorce families is the unique application that allows marriage and family therapists to respond to the increased demands for their expertise of the social, cultural, and temporal juncture at which parents, children, and divorce meet. Although statistical research is needed to validate this application of theory, current research and family systems

theory corroborate the relationship between attachment styles and coparent relationships postdivorce.

## REFERENCES

- Ahrons, C. (1995). *The good divorce*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Ahrons, C., & Miller, R. (1993). The effect of the post-divorce relationship on paternal involvement: A longitudinal analysis. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *63*, 441–450.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bader, E., & Pearson, P. T. (1988). *In quest of the mythical mate: A developmental approach to diagnosis and treatment in couple therapy*. New York, NY: Brunner Mazel.
- Bartholomew, K. (1990). Avoidance of intimacy: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *7*, 147–178.
- Baum, N. (2004). Coping with “absence–presence”: Noncustodial fathers’ parenting behaviors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *74*(3), 316–324.
- Baum, N. (2006). Postdivorce paternal disengagement: Failed mourning and role fusion. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *32*(2), 245–254.
- Borelli, J. L., & David, D. H. (2004). Attachment theory and research as a guide to psychotherapy practice. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, *23*, 257–287.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. London, UK: Tavistock.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent–child attachment and healthy human development*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Braithwaite, D. O., McBride, M. C., & Schrodt, P. (2003). “Parent teams” and the everyday interactions of co-parenting in stepfamilies. *Communications Reports*, *16*(2), 93–111.
- Carter, E. A., & McGoldrick, M. (1999). *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family and social perspectives*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cassidy, J. (1988). Child–mother attachment and the self in six-year-olds. *Child Development*, *59*, 121–134.
- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1990). Adult attachment, working models, and relationships quality in dating couples. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *58*, 644–663.
- Crockenberg, S., & Langrock, A. (2001). The role of emotion and emotional regulation in children’s responses to interparental conflict. In J. Grych & F. Fincham

- (Eds.), *Interparental conflict and child development* (pp. 129–156). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Divorce Statistics. (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.divorcestatistics.org/>
- Emery, R. (1994). *Renegotiating family relationships, divorce, child custody, and mediation*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Feeney, J. A., Noller, P., & Callan, V. J. (1994). Attachment style, communication, and satisfaction in the early years of marriage. In K. Bartholomew & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Attachment processes in adulthood* (pp. 269–308). London, UK: Kingsley.
- Fraley, R. C. (2002). Attachment stability from infancy to adulthood: Meta-analysis and dynamic modeling of developmental mechanisms. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 6(2), 123–151.
- Fraley, R. C., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Airport separations: A naturalistic study of adult attachment dynamics in separating couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 1198–1212.
- Garber, B. D. (2001, February 9). ADHD or not ADHD: Custody and visitation considerations. *New Hampshire Bar News*, 11(15), 22–24.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 511–524.
- Hetherington, E. M. (Ed.). (1999). *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. 1982. Effects of divorce on parents and children. In M. Lamb (Ed.), *Nontraditional families*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hughes, D. (2007). *Attachment-focused family therapy*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Jacobs, J. (1982). The effect of divorce on fathers: An overview of the literature. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139, 1235–1241.
- Kelly, J. B. (1998). Marital conflict, divorce and children's adjustment. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinics of North America*, 7, 259–271.
- Kelly, J. B. (2000). Children's adjustment in conflicted marriage and divorce: A decade review of research. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 39, 963–983.
- Kobak, R. R., & Duemmler, S. (1994). Attachment and conversation: Toward a discourse analysis of adolescent and adult security. In K. Bartholomew & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Attachment processes in adulthood* (pp. 121–149). London, UK: Kingsley.
- Kobak, R. R., & Hazan, C. (1991). Attachment in marriage: Effects of security and accuracy of working models. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 861–869.
- Kruk, E. (1993). Promoting co-operative parenting after separation: A therapeutic/interventionist model of family meditation. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 15, 235–261.
- Madden-Derdich, D. A., & Arditti, J. A. (1999). The ties that bind: Attachment between former spouses. *Family Relations*, 48, 243–249.
- McIntosh, J. (2003). Enduring conflict in parental separation: Pathways of impact on child development. *Journal of Family Studies*, 9(1), 63–80.
- Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (1996). Emotional reactions to loss. In C. Magai & S. H. McFadden (Eds.), *Handbook of emotion, adult development, and aging* (pp. 554–572). London, UK: Academic.

- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pistole, M. C. (1989). Attachment in adult romantic relationships satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 6, 505–510.
- Shaver, P. R., & Hazan, C. (1988). A biased overview of the study of love. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 5, 473–501.
- Shaver, P. R., Hazan, C., & Bradshaw, D. (1988). Love as attachment: The integration of three behavioral systems. In R. H. Sternberg & M. L. Barnes (Eds.), *The psychology of love* (pp. 68–99). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (1994). Stress and secure base relationships in adulthood. In K. Bartholomew & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Attachment processes in adulthood* (pp. 181–204). London, UK: Kingsley.
- Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., & Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(5), 899–914.
- Sturge-Apple, M. L., Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (2006). Hostility and withdrawal in marital conflict: Effects on parental emotional unavailability and inconsistent discipline. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(2), 227–238.
- Vareschi, C. G., & Bursik, K. (2005). Attachment style differences in the parental interactions and adaptation patterns of divorcing parents. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 42(3–4), 15–32.
- Weiss, R. (1976). The emotional impact of marital separation. *Journal of Social Issues*, 32(1), 135–168.
- Wolchik, S. A., Wilcox, K. L., Tein, J.-Y., & Sandler, I. N. (2000). Maternal acceptance and consistency of discipline as buffers of divorce stressors on children's psychological adjustment problems. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 28(1), 87–102.