

*CHILDREN LIVING IN STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENTS:
A RESOURCE KIT*

*VI.g. Children of Divorced or Absent Parents/
Orphaned or Foster Children*

“Even a good divorce restructures children’s childhoods and leaves them traveling between two distinct worlds. It becomes their job, not their parents’, to make sense of those two worlds.”

Elizabeth Marquardt, author of *Between Two Worlds*, as quoted in the *New York Times*, November 5, 2005¹

Discussion

About 40 percent of all children in the United States today are children of divorced parents, and most of them appear to adjust to their parents’ divorce without developing serious problems. But 20 to 25 percent of children do show signs that they are not dealing well with this change in the relationship between their mothers and fathers, and some of the problems they develop may continue into adult life. Negative postdivorce outcomes that can follow these children into adolescence may include dropping out of school, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, and depression.²

For the parents, divorce may provide relief or it may be so devastating that they fail to provide for their children’s needs for reassurance. For children, divorce is almost always a frightening and confusing experience, and they are likely to see divorce as a direct threat to their security. Parents who are hurt or overwhelmed may seek comfort from their children rather than providing it. Many children are quick to believe that they are the reason for the conflict between their parents and try to take on responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves. The trauma of losing one or both parents to divorce can leave children vulnerable to both physical and mental illnesses.³ And, as the National Institute on Drug Abuse

¹ Lewin, T. (November 5, 2005). Poll says even quiet divorces affect children’s path. *New York Times*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.nytimes.com/2005/11/05/national/05divorce.html.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Prevention: Family Guide. *Divorce counseling may help prevent teen substance abuse*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.family.samhsa.gov/be/counseling.aspx.

³ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (July 2004). *Facts for Families: Children and divorce*. No. 1. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/children_and_divorce.

(NIDA) points out, “Risk of drug abuse increases greatly during times of transition, such as changing schools, moving, or divorce.”⁴

Despite popular perceptions that divorce is increasing in the United States, it has actually declined considerably in recent years. But this decline is explained by increased cohabitation and fewer marriages, so it is not necessarily good news in terms of how children fare in these relationships. When it comes to family stability and the impact of divorce on children, it is important to note that in the eyes of children, cohabitation may be the equivalent of marriage and if their cohabiting, but unmarried, parents decide to go separate ways, it can have much the same impact as divorce. There are differences between marriage and cohabitation, but when these relationships end, the effect on children may be more similar than it is different. The shift from traditional marriage to cohabitation is significant for youths. The chance that a premarital cohabitation will break up within 5 years is 49 percent, compared to 10 percent of those in a first marriage. These odds worsen over time, and 62 percent of cohabitations end after 10 years, while the chance of a first marriage ending at that point is 33 percent.⁵

The breakup of a marriage or cohabitation is not the only event that may cause children to be separated from one or both parents. Parental absence often may occur because the parents are engaged in substance abuse, which can cause them to be absent from their parental responsibilities physically and/or psychologically while they are under the influence or trying to obtain drugs. Substance abuse by parents was presumed to be the main reason that 68 percent of young children in foster care in California and New York were removed from their parents’ home in 1991.⁶ More recently, the label “meth orphan” has been applied sometimes to children whose parents are either in jail or dead because of their methamphetamine use, although it is at least as appropriate to refer to “alcohol orphans,” “cocaine orphans,” and the like. At the same time, HIV/AIDS, much of it associated with substance abuse, is creating vast numbers of AIDS orphans.

Grandparents, other relatives, or other caregiving adults sometimes assume parental responsibilities when a child’s actual parent(s) is absent, often helping such children cope successfully. But the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry cautions that “Many children living with grandparents arrive with preexisting problems or risk factors including abuse, neglect, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, and loss of parents (death, abandonment and incarceration). This situation can create risks for both children and grandparents.”⁷

⁴ National Institutes of Health (NIH), NIDA. (February 2008). Preventing drug abuse: The best strategy. In *Drugs, brains, and behavior: The science of addiction*. NIH Pub No. 07-5605. Rockville, MD: NIDA. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.nida.nih.gov/scienceofaddiction/sciofadddiction.pdf.

⁵ Bramlett, M. D. and Mosher, W. D. (2002). Cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the United States. *Vital and Health Statistics*, 23(22), 1-95. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf.

⁶ Ross, J. L. (October 28, 1997). *Parental substance abuse: Implications for children, the child welfare system, and foster care outcomes*. U.S. General Accounting Office. GAO/T-HEHS-98-40. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.gao.gov/archive/1998/he98040t.pdf.

⁷ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (September 2000). *Facts for families: Grandparents raising grandchildren*. No. 77. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/grandparents_raising_grandchildren.

But 2.7 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds—nearly 700,000 of their age group—have been in foster care at any given time. Foster care is often not the only result of parental substance abuse problems leading to neglect, abandonment, and/or abuse of children. Youth who are or have been in foster care are at heightened risk for drug abuse and are more likely to need treatment for substance abuse than others their age.⁸

Thousands of teens who age out of the foster care system each year—or run away before they reach age 18 and are automatically released—are left without ongoing connection to family members or caring adults and often without shelter, employment, or other resources, greatly increasing their risks for substance abuse, homelessness, and other serious problems.

Facts

- About 40 percent of all children in the United States today are children of divorced parents; 20 to 25 percent of them show signs that they are not dealing well with this change in their family structure and are at risk for negative outcomes, including substance abuse.⁹
- Children of divorced parents are more likely to engage in substance use and have substance-using friends than children from two-parent homes.¹⁰
- In one study, 54 percent of sixth and seventh graders with divorced parents use alcohol compared to 36 percent of children with parents who never divorced.¹¹
- Forty-nine percent of premarital cohabitations are likely to break up within 5 years, compared to 10 percent of those in a first marriage; 62 percent of cohabitations end after 10 years, while the chance of a first marriage ending at that point is 33 percent.¹²
- In 2005, an estimated 680,000 youths (2.7 percent) aged 12 to 17 had ever been in foster care.¹³

⁸ SAMHSA, Office of Applied Studies. (February 18, 2005). *The NSDUH report. Substance use and need for treatment among youths who have been in foster care*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k5/FosterCare/FosterCare.htm.

⁹ SAMHSA, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention: Family Guide. (n.d.) *Divorce counseling may help prevent teen substance abuse*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.family.samhsa.gov/be/counseling.aspx.

¹⁰ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). (March 2005). *Family matters: Substance abuse and the American family. A CASA white paper*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/380-family_matters_report.pdf.

¹¹ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). (March 2005). *Family matters: Substance abuse and the American family. A CASA white paper*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/380-family_matters_report.pdf.

¹² Bramlett, M. D. and Mosher, W. D. (2002). Cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the United States. *Vital and Health Statistics*, 23(22), 1-95. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf.

¹³ SAMHSA, Office of Applied Studies. (February 18, 2005). *The NSDUH report. Substance use and need for treatment among youths who have been in foster care*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k5/FosterCare/FosterCare.htm.

- Youths who have ever been in foster care had higher rates of past year use of any illicit drug than those who were never in foster care (33.6 vs. 21.7 percent). The rate of past year alcohol use was similar for these two groups.¹⁴
- Youths who have ever been in foster care had higher rates of need for substance abuse treatment than youths who have never been in foster care. More youths who have ever been in foster care were in need of treatment for alcohol or illicit drug use in the past year (17.4 percent) compared with youths who have never been in foster care.¹⁵
- African-American children represent about two-thirds of the foster care population and remain in care longer.¹⁶
- Two out of three children placed in foster care are reunited with their birth parents within 2 years. But a significant number spend long periods of time in foster care while waiting for adoption or other permanent arrangements.¹⁷
- The Orphan Foundation of America estimates that more than 25,000 foster youth age out of State care or run away every year.¹⁸ (Estimates from several other government and private sources range from 20,000 to 30,000.)
- In the only nationally representative study of youth discharged from foster care that has been published (1991, based on 1988 data), 39 percent were emotionally disturbed, 50 percent had used illegal drugs, and 25 percent were involved with the legal system.¹⁹

Federal Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Prevention's (CSAP's) A Family Guide To Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy & Drug Free

www.family.samhsa.gov/

This public education Web site communicates with parents and other caring adults about how to promote children's mental health and prevent the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. The Web site provides tips on talking with your child, getting involved in your child's life, setting

¹⁴ SAMHSA, Office of Applied Studies. (February 18, 2005). *The NSDUH report. Substance use and need for treatment among youths who have been in foster care*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k5/FosterCare/FosterCare.htm.

¹⁵ SAMHSA, Office of Applied Studies. (February 18, 2005). *The NSDUH report. Substance use and need for treatment among youths who have been in foster care*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k5/FosterCare/FosterCare.htm.

¹⁶ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (May 2005). *Facts for families: Foster care*. No. 64. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/foster_care.

¹⁷ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (May 2005). *Facts for families: Foster care*. No. 64. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/foster_care.

¹⁸ Orphan Foundation of America. (2007). *Quick facts*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.orphan.org/index.php?id=8.

¹⁹ Wertheimer, R. (December 2002). *Research brief. Youth who "age out" of foster care: Troubled lives, troubling prospects*. Publication #2002-59. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.childtrends.org/files/FosterCareRB.pdf.

rules with consequences, being a role model, supporting your child's social development, and monitoring your child's activities.

SAMHSA's Health Information Network (SHIN)

www.samhsa.gov/SHIN

SHIN (also known as the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information and the Center for Mental Health Services Knowledge Exchange Network clearinghouse) stores publications, video products, and archived Webcasts for and about children of substance abusers and can be ordered free or at cost. Some relevant SAMHSA products available here are of special note:

SAMHSA's *Children's Program Kit* (with videos on DVD)

<http://ncadistore.samhsa.gov/catalog/productDetails.aspx?ProductID=17245>

The *Children's Program Kit* (2003, Inventory Number: CPKIT-D) is designed to provide materials for substance abuse programs so that they can initiate educational support programs for the children of their clients in substance abuse treatment. The program will teach children skills such as solving problems, coping, social competence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future. The toolkit has activities for children in elementary school, middle school, and high school. It contains information for therapists to distribute to their clients to help parents understand the needs of their children, and training materials, including posters and DVDs, for substance abuse treatment staff members who plan to offer support groups for children. [*Note:* Despite this focus on treatment providers, much of the kit's contents can be easily adapted for use in prevention programs.]

SAMHSA's *Native American Children's Program Kit*

<http://ncadistore.samhsa.gov/catalog/productDetails.aspx?ProductID=17286>

This edition (2005, Inventory Number: NCPKIT-D) of SAMHSA's *Children's Program Kit* has been adapted for use with and by American-Indian audiences and developed with assistance from White Bison and other American-Indian community members.

Private Organizations

Center for Navigating Family Change

<http://cnfc.org/>

A page on the Center's Web site contains links to several resources and suggested readings for parents and, separately, for children: <http://cnfc.org/links.html>.

HIV InSite

<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite>

HIV InSite is operated by the Center for HIV Information (CHI) at the [University of California San Francisco \(UCSF\)](http://www.ucsf.edu). The site includes an extensive list of described links to Orphans & Affected Families: Related Resources, organized within such categories as guidelines and best

practices and provider education and training at <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=kbr-08-01-12>.

National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org/

The Association's Web site includes *Divorce: A Parents' Guide for Supporting Children* by John E. Desrochers, Ph.D., ABPP, New Canaan (CT) Public Schools (at: www.nasponline.org/resources/parenting/divorce_ho.aspx).

National Organization of Single Mothers (NOSM)

www.singlemothers.org

This networking system helps single mothers meet the challenges of daily life with wisdom, dignity, confidence, and courage. Dues are \$19. They provide assistance in starting new groups. Write: NOSM, P.O. Box 68, Midland, NC 28107; Call: (704) 888-KIDS, Fax: (704) 888-1752, E-mail: info@singlemothers.org.

Parenting 24/7 online article, The Effects of Divorce on Children

<http://parenting247.org/article.cfm?ContentID=646>

An online article by Robert Hughes, Jr., Ph.D., from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, asks and answers the question: "What are the factors in divorcing families that contribute to children having difficulties and what are the factors that foster children's adaptation?"

Parents Without Partners

www.parentswithoutpartners.org

This is an educational organization of single parents (either divorced, separated, widowed, or never married). The site contains a newsletter, online chat room, and chapter development guidelines. Dues are \$20-\$40. Write: PWP, 1650 S. Dixie Highway, Suite 510, Boca Raton, FL 33432; Call: (800) 637-7974, (561) 391-8833; Fax: (561) 395-8557; E-mail: Fpf62930@aol.com.

Single Mothers by Choice

www.singlemothersbychoice.com

This site offers support and information to mature, single women who have chosen, or who are considering, single motherhood. Services include "Thinkers" workshops, a quarterly newsletter, and membership. For a brochure and list of back issues of the newsletter, write: SMC, P.O. Box 1642, Gracie Square Station, New York, NY 10028; Call: (212) 988-0993.

Single Parent Resource Center

<http://singleparentusa.com/>

The Center Web site contains a network of single parent self-help groups, along with information and referral, seminars, consultation, and a resource library. There is a separate group for men,

and coed groups are available. In addition, the Center is working on groups for homeless single parents and mothers coming out of prison. A newsletter is available, as are guidelines and materials for starting parenting and teen groups. Write: Single Parent Resource Center, 31 E. 28th St., New York, NY 10016; Call: (212) 951-7030; Fax: (212) 951-7037; E-mail: SJones532@aol.com; <http://singleparentusa.com/>.

Strategies/Programs

10 Steps Parents Can Take To Prevent Substance Abuse

From *Family Matters: Substance Abuse and The American Family. A CASA White Paper*²⁰

- Set a good example;
- Know your child's whereabouts, activities, and friends;
- Eat dinner together regularly;
- Set fair rules and hold your child to them;
- Be caring and supportive of your child;
- Maintain open lines of communication;
- Surround your child with positive role models;
- Incorporate religion or spirituality into family life;
- Learn the signs and symptoms of teen substance abuse and conditions that increase risk; and
- If problems occur, get help promptly.

All adolescents, and those in the foster care system in particular, need comprehensive, developmentally appropriate alcohol, tobacco, and other drug prevention. Together, peer education and counseling, family therapy, recreational activities, mentoring, education programs, and health counseling can help them avoid substance abuse.²¹

SAMHSA's Children's Program Kit

<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/promos/coa/>

The kit is available free through SHIN (see page 5 of this section). Phone: (800) 729-6686.

²⁰ CASA. (March 2005). *Family matters: Substance abuse and the American family. A CASA white paper*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/380-family_matters_report.pdf.

²¹ Connect for Kids. (February 8, 1999). *The impact of substance abuse on foster care*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.connectforkids.org/articles/substance_abuse_foster_care#prevention.

Strengthening Families Program (SPF)

www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org

SFP is a 14-session family skills training program designed for the high-risk, 6- to 12-year-old children of substance abusers.

Successfully Raising Resilient Foster Children Who Have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: What Works?

www.envisionjournal.com/application/main.aspx?MainFormOption=2

This article from the April 2004 issue of *Envision* describes the author's examination of the factors that contribute to successful foster home placement for children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) through a study conducted with long-term foster parents fostering through a First Nation child welfare agency in western Manitoba. The article explores the experiences of foster parents raising children with FASD, paying particular attention to some of the specific problems facing parents of adolescents.