There are other people who try to prevent families from divorcing,” says Dr. Jeffrey Cookston, professor in psychology at San Francisco State University. “But I accept the inevitability of divorce for many of them... and focus on how to protect the children who are going to experience parental separation.” Every year, 1 million children are involved in new divorces, according to census data. In 2012, one out of every four children came from a divorced household. Psychologists have studied divorcing families from various angles for over 30 years, asking questions such as: Does divorce pose risk to children? If so, how does divorce affect personal adjustment, career success, and future marriage and family relationships? And how can intervention programs serve separating and divorcing families? In his research, Jeffrey Cookston takes a slightly different approach. He focuses on the relationships between parents and children during divorce and how bolstering such relationships can, in turn, protect children from future effects.

Cookston emphasizes that, “It is not that divorce is the bad guy here. Divorce is just associated with a lot of changes in family processes and relationships.” By modifying those family problems, he says, “we can spare the children the mental health adjustment problems” that are more common in children from divorced families.
I visited Cookston in his laboratory, and watched his eyes light up when he explained how he "stumbled upon" his scholarly path as a graduate student at the University of Texas over 16 years ago. A professor had assigned Cookston’s graduate school class to write a review paper. He requested permission to instead conduct analysis on a dataset focused on adolescent health. Without realizing or intending it, Cookston followed his enthusiasm for that subject into an eventual postdoctoral fellowship that wound up shaping his entire career’s direction.

Cookston is philosophical about his life’s work in psychology and his own personal connection to divorce. “The essential quality that separates a psychologist from those of us who ‘like people’ and ‘want to help people,’” he says, “is using scientific inquiry to answer questions about behavior.” Cookston’s interest in family relationships during divorce was in part, a reflection of his own childhood. When Cookston’s parents went through divorce, he and his younger brother were among the youngest children to become distraught and anxious, and this interferes with their focus on school and social activities. Cookston explains that when parents quarrel, “the warm, accepting, interested, and curious parent becomes someone who is distressed, frazzled, distracted, and

his attention shifts momentarily to an incoming text message. After reading it, he chuckles. His younger brother is describing plans for an upcoming hike in the Appalachian Mountains. Cookston’s relationship with his university students and his family are important to him and his actions, conversation—even his office decor—all reflect this.

“Dr. Cookston is a wonderful mentor... I have had a great experience in his research lab,” says Louis Cornejo, an undergraduate senior who works with Cookston. “Dr. Cookston is very supportive. He has helped me along the way with applying to graduate school and summer research programs and currently, with my senior honor’s thesis.” Cornejo, who graduated in May 2012, has chosen to stay on at SF State and continue working with Cookston during his Master’s program.

Cookston’s passion is evident when he talks about his graduate students’ success. For young researchers, being the first author on a published paper “can be a game changer in getting into a Ph.D. program of their choice,” he explains. In many of the projects he supports, students’ names appear ahead of his own on the author list. Cookston’s graduate students have continued on in Ph.D. programs at Columbia University and Arizona State University. Former students also are currently working for UC San Francisco and the Veteran’s Affairs Research Division.

Cookston likes and values raising a family in an urban area. Families sometimes move to the suburbs to escape urban problems, he observes, but “You can’t run from the problems within the family.” Cookston’s research reveals that divorce – a legal term – is neither the end nor the beginning of the story for families with separated parents. Household tensions typically begin well before the divorce and exposure to unhappy parents results in distress for children.

Because of his research focus, Cookston begins to interact with families only after they have already decided to divorce. He emphasizes to them that, despite this decision, they should still form peaceful co-parenting relationships before, during, and after separation. Witnessing parent conflict, he explains, is stressful for children and threatens their sense of security. When parents fight, children tend to think, “If you can fall out of love with Mum, then you can fall out of love with me.” Inter-parent conflict also causes children to become distraught and anxious, and this interferes with their focus on school and social activities. Cookston explains that when parents quarrel, “the warm, accepting, interested, and curious parent becomes someone who is distressed, frazzled, distracted, and

In another line of research, Dr. Cookston has been collecting data from preschoolers. Prior to pre-school, children develop awareness of their own biological sex and begin to behave in ways they believe are appropriate to being a boy or a girl. The Toy Preference Task is a commonly-used method for assessing how much children have internalized messages about whether certain toys are appropriate for boys and girls.

In the top photograph, Dr. Cookston is holding a picture with two toys that past researchers have demonstrated children agree are “boy” toys. In the middle are pictures of two “girl” toys. Below is one “boy” toy and one “girl” toy. A boy who is aware that he is biologically male and who endorses many of the traditionally male toy preferences will likely need very little time to indicate his preference for the car below. It will take him more time to choose between two “boy” toys and the longest amount of time to choose between two “girl” toys (if we indicates a preference at all).

There are a number of factors that influence whether children indicate the toy preferences above. First, as preschoolers get older, they become more sensitive to the information they evaluate as being relevant to themselves. Second, children’s parents, teachers, and peers provide a lot of cues about whether toys and activities and clothing are appropriate for boys and girls.

Photo page 52.

Dr. Cookston shows two props used to assess how much preschoolers understand about the mental states of other people. The props are used to allow the child an opportunity to hold a toy during the interview as well as allowing the child an opportunity to infer the beliefs of the person depicted by the toy. For example, we tell the children that Jessie’s grandmother prefers carrots to cookies, next ask which the child prefers, and then ask which Jessie’s grandmother prefers. The youngest of preschoolers might struggle to remember the grandmother’s preference for carrots given the child’s preference for cookies. Clearly, all of the children prefer the cookie to the carrot!
Talking about conflict with parents:
Four observations and two questions
by Dr. Jeffrey Cookston

People frequently portray adolescence as a time of increasing—and distressing—parent-teen conflict. Most research has focused on the antecedents and consequences of parent-adolescent conflict. Considerably less attention, however, has been paid to the strategies adolescents employ to manage conflict.

Adolescents can reduce conflict with parents by behaving in ways that parents approve of or responding differently to conflict with parents. Based on some research we recently produced, I would like to suggest yet another way that adolescents cope with such conflict: by talking about it with others. In our recent paper in New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, we offered a hypothetical model to explain who adolescents confide in about conflicts with fathers (see figure bottom left). Following are four observations from this work.

1. Adolescents talk about their relationships with their parents. In our study, we asked 10th grade adolescents who they talk to when they “are upset or bothered” about their relationship with their parents. In our study, half of the co-resident fathers were unemployed. Over 75% of adolescents said they talked to their mothers and 62% said they talked directly to Dad. (Recall that almost half of our fathers were unemployed; children are less likely to seek out their parents than biological parents.) Thus, contrary to stereotypes of brooding, distant adolescents, our results suggest that teens do talk with their parents about their relationships with their fathers.

2. Adolescents talk to parents who listen, and there is an art to getting children to talk. When we predicted whether mothers and fathers were able to get their children to discuss the father-child relationship, a clear story emerged. Adolescents talk to more about dad when she is a warm and accepting parent and they talk to dad when he is a warm and accepting parent. Additionally, adolescents are willing to talk to parents about the sensitive topic of conflict with a parent when their conversation is likely to be met with an open ear and accepting mind.

3. Qualities of the marital relationship are linked to whether a teen seeks out a parent. We found that adolescents are less likely to talk to mom about the co-resident father when their parents report low levels of coparenting. Specifically, when parents reported low levels of cooperation, the adolescents talked less to mom about this topic. Likely, adolescents are aware of the tension between parents and they are less likely to talk to mom when they have concerns about fueling conflict between the parents.

4. When it comes to teenagers seeking counsel, there are more similarities than differences between families of European and Mexican ancestry. In our sample we had approximately equal groups of teenagers from Mexican origin and European origin. Overall, they displayed similar patterns of seeking and sources to talk about thefather-child relationship. Surprisingly, even a number of indicators of cultural values (e.g., family, expression of respect, gender roles, acculturation) failed to replicate the patterns we detected of seeking out others for support.