DIVORCE AS A BEGINNING:
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.

Repairing Family Relationships

By Jennifer Chinchilla

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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 Mom, 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 preschool, children develop awareness of their own biological sex and begin to behave in ways they believe are appropriate to being a boy of 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!
more inconsistent in their parenting.” This leads to declining quality in parent-child relationships and can lead to children’s mental health adjustment problems such as aggression, depression, anxiety, stress, and delinquent behavior.

In 2007, Cookston published a paper with colleagues from Arizona State University describing a multi-session preventative intervention program called Dads for Life (DFL). The program had two main goals: The first goal was to develop stronger relationships between fathers and children by improving the father’s parenting skills, including listening, communicating, and disciplining. The second goal was to develop stronger understanding relationships between the mother and father; these, in turn, would result in better co-parenting skills and decreased conflict between the former partners.

To enroll in the Dads for Life program, the family must have already divorced for a minimum of four months; the child (or children) needed to be between ages 4 and 12 and the mother needed to have primary physical custody of the child (children). After both parents agreed to the father’s participation, 127 fathers began the DFL program and each attended eight 2-hour group sessions and two 1-hour individual sessions.

Each group session began with a 10-minute segment from a film series called “Eight Short Films about Divorced Fathers.” In these, professional actors portrayed real-life scenarios between a divorced couple and their child. These included situations with elevated levels of the conflict, discomfort and disagreements common in divorced couples. After the videos, the participants self-reflect on the skills and planned how they could be used in similar situations. Half of the video clips focused on scenarios that would increase the father’s parental skills, while the other half focused on handling conflict with ex-wives. The fathers then met with clinical psychologists in individual sessions.

After the Dads for Life program concluded, mothers reported a significant increase in healthy co-parenting with their ex-husbands in categories such as deciding on the child’s needs, trusting one another’s judgment, and creating a united front for the child. Mothers also recorded decreased conflict with their ex-husbands and saw better anger management. The study showed that the Dads for Life intervention could lessen the burden on the child. It neither identified the most useful specific approaches, however, nor documented improvements to father-child relationships. As Cookston explained, “Because the fathers were non-custodial parents,” it would be difficult to change the quality of their parenting. However, he continued, “if intervening with Dad helps the parents get along better,” then that, in turn, would “help Mom [to] be a better mother when she’s with the children the majority of the time.”

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Since 2002, Cookston and colleagues from Arizona State University and UC Riverside, have been following 392 two-parent families with adolescents in the household. They call this research the Parents and Youth Study (PAYS) http://pays.sfsu.edu. PAYS measures the influence of fathers on the mental health and behavior of teenagers along with the mothers’ contributions. The study differs from DFL and others in that it focuses on the “meaning” that adolescents take from family life, as well as on the similarities and differences between cultures and types of fathers.

Cookston’s team has found that a teen’s depression, if present, can influence the way he or she sees and understands a fathers’ behaviors. They have also discovered that adolescents talk to parents about family conflict when they feel that the parents accept them for who they are. In the PAYS study, families are either of European or Mexican ancestry and fathers are either biological or stepfathers. Nevertheless, PAYS families tend to have more similarities than differences. Cookston’s team has surveyed the families in PAYS four times already and has plans to interview them a fifth time. “We are in the 10th year of data collection and the project concludes in 2014,” explains Cookston.

Cookston and his team are very excited because now that the children have themselves reached adulthood, the researchers can determine whether details of early family life help explain mental health issues in young adulthood. Based on the results, Cookston will be able to trace later problems to earlier behaviors and interactions. His goal is to develop a program that can teach families how to help adolescents through a time of physical, emotional, and relationship transition with minimal distress. Ultimately, Cookston hopes the intervention will help prevent mental health disorders that develop during childhood, in a divorcing family, but do not show up until adulthood. resent different emotions, family dynamic, and a child in distress.