After 14 years of marriage, two children, three years of counseling and a brief separation and reconciliation, Drew and Lynette arrived at my office. Lynette wanted a divorce and Drew felt they should stick it out for at least four more years until their youngest son, Josh, graduated from high school. Both had consulted lawyers. While Lynette was pleading for a non-adversarial divorce, Drew’s response was that if Lynette insisted upon “ruining their children’s lives,” he would fight for sole custody of the boys and continue living with them in the family home. The climate was set for a nasty custody battle.

Constance R. Ahrons, PhD

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON Children
Good divorces are invisible. They represent the American way of divorce. The message is that bad divorces appear to be in the extreme tail of the distribution, but the overwhelming majority of normal family life. Long, drawn-out battles between ex-spouses or murdered ex-spouses are the stories that make headlines. On the other hand, the everyday stories of children who are not talking for weeks on end, the boys who don’t talk at all, or the parents who have no idea how to manage their children in this situation, are the stories that are often ignored.

The media like the unusual stories, not the everyday stories of normal family life. Long, drawn-out custody battles or murdered ex-spouses are the stories that make headlines. On a normal bell curve, these cases fall at the two extremes of the bell curve, but the message is that bad divorces appear to be more common than they really are. Good divorces are invisible.

What further complicates our understanding of divorce and its effects on children is that divorce is one of those hot, value-laden issues that occupies center-stage in the highly politicized “family values” debate. Complex realities become submerged in polarized discussions of good and bad. The result: marriage is good; divorce is bad.

Therapists Are Not Immune
Therapists, too, are caught in the same dilemma. One day we hear a report that divorce dooms children to lifelong problems; the next day we hear that children of divorce fare as well as children reared in other family structures.

When we rely on the media for our information, we should be aware that the media will be subject to their biases. The media need news and, unfortunately, that often means bad news. The media like the unusual stories, not the everyday stories of normal family life. Long, drawn-out custody battles or murdered ex-spouses are the stories that make headlines.

Historically, there have always been battles between those who want to reform society and those who want to resist change. And so, we are also seeing pending legislation in some states to rescind no-fault divorce, to reinstate longer waiting periods and mandatory reconciliation counseling, and to reconsider the “social experiment” of joint custody. Although the incidence of divorce clearly contradicts the notion that it is a social ill reflective of social disorganization and therefore legal intervention is necessary to limit freedom of personal choice by preventing unnecessary divorces, of course, we have no agreement on a definition of unnecessary.

Some Points of Agreement
A review of the last decade or so of the divorce literature now reveals a radically different approach to the study of divorce. Unlike the early focus on cause and pathology, the growth and
proliferation of studies shows increased sophistication in the study of divorce as a highly complex societal change. Current research focuses on divorce as a multifaceted process comprised of a large number of interacting factors that combine in diverse configurations and in identifying a range of child outcomes. There is increased agreement, however, that the process begins long before the event of legal divorce and continues long afterwards. Although these points of agreement have in many ways contributed to some of the misinformation that abounds, we only get bits and pieces of the larger picture.

It is impossible for any study to take into account all the complexities of real life, or of the individual differences that allow one family to thrive in a situation that would create enormous stress and frayed relationships in another. But it is in these variations that we can begin to make sense of how divorce impacts the lives of individuals and families.

**Converging Research Findings**

Which children, under what circumstances, have what kinds of reactions? The short answer to this question is: it depends. It depends on a complex interaction of factors about the child, the parents, the pre and postdivorce family, the social and environmental factors. Although there are no universal answers for any given child, I can offer four sets of findings that provide useful guidelines for clinicians and the families we treat.

First, most children (75 to 80 percent) who experience the divorce of their parents grow up to become healthy, well-functioning adults. Presented from the other perspective, 20 to 25 percent of children are likely to suffer long-term consequences. Across a diversity of outcomes in a large number of studies, the statistical differences noted between children in intact families and children in divorced families are small. It is now commonly accepted across studies that divorce must be viewed as a long-term process that begins prior to parental separation and lasts long after the legal event of the divorce. Recent findings show that many of the children’s problems attributed in past studies to “the divorce” actually began long before and can be located in the predivorce family situation.

Second, divorce is a stressful process because of the difficult transitions and family changes it sets in motion and results in the potential to put children at risk for both short- and long-term distress. These potential risks can be mediated by a large number of interacting factors such as a child’s temperament, coping abilities, resilience, emotional health prior to the divorce, and relationship quality with each parent prior to and after the divorce. In addition, major factors that mediate the impact of the stresses associated with the normal family changes after divorce include the parents’ maturity and mental health, their continuing relationship with each other, their economic resources, and the timing and nature of new partner cohabitation and remarriage. It is helpful for parents to know that many of the circumstances and tasks surrounding divorce are modifiable and they are able to behave in specific ways that can reduce the negative consequences for their children.

Third, ongoing, unresolved interparental conflict, whether parents are married or divorced, emerges consis-
tently as a major factor that has negative consequences for children. If divorce reduces the amount and frequency of interparental conflict a child is exposed to, it is likely to have a positive impact. However, if the interparental conflict continues unabated or even escalates after divorce, it is likely to impact the child negatively.

High-conflict marriages that end in divorce appear to account for between one-quarter and one-third of the divorces. Recently, a few writers have claimed that children would be better off if their parents in low-conflict marriages stayed married, but no solid research exists to support these claims. There is no agreement about the definition of a low-conflict marriage, nor do we have any long-term studies to support that claim. Children who feel their parents’ marriage was good and had no indication of a divorce are most likely those children who initially were most surprised and distressed by the divorce. We have no data to support the view that those children make poorer adjustments over the long term. Until we have studies that agree on a definition of what characterizes a low-conflict marriage, comparing those whose parents did and did not divorce, we will not have that answer. Suggesting that parents in low-conflict marriage remain together for the sake of the children is mere speculation at this point. In the words of Carl Jung, “A shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases.”

Fourth, new research on early interventions is very promising and shows that educational programs and counseling strategies that teach problem solving and conflict reduction skills to parents reduce the level and frequency of interparental conflict. Current research in the use of mediation, as contrasted with the adversarial process, also shows a reduction in interparental conflict and less continued reliance on litigation.

So we can conclude that answering Lynette and Drew’s question requires a large portion of speculation. There is no simple answer. However, using the findings cited, clinicians can assist their clients in identifying a course of action that is realistic for their situation. Knowledge truly becomes power in the hands of parents facing the challenges and choices in their future. We can assist parents in finding “shoes that pinch the least” by identifying patterns of strength and resilience in children who thrive in healthy postdivorce families.