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Promoting Better Fathering Among Divorced NonResident Fathers

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As Bray (this volume) has documented, the divorce or marital separation of their parents is a very common condition faced by children in America today. Currently, over 40% of children are expected to live in a divorced home before the age of 16 (Cherlin, 1992), more than double the proportion 30 years ago (Shiono & Quinn, 1994). A substantial empirical literature has now arisen and been summarized most aptly by Amato (Amato & Keith, 1991a; 1991b; Amato, 2000; 2001; in press) documenting the potentially adverse affect of divorce on children. This literature also suggests that divorced fathers have a substantial role to play in impacting their children's well-being. For example, Amato and Keith (1991a) showed that the following factors (listed roughly in order of effect size) negatively affect children's post-divorce outcomes: (1) high levels of post-divorce interparental conflict; (2) a disturbed relationship with an impaired custodial parent (typically the mother); (3) an absent or ineffective nonresident parent (typically the father); (4) increased economic hardship; (5) substantial levels of environmental changes (i.e., moves, other losses), etc.; and (6) the child's poor or ineffective coping skills. While the factor above most obviously impacted by the nonresident father is (3), each of the others is plausibly also affected to some degree by fathers' actions and reactions. For example, fathers are one of the two parties involved in conflict (factor 1, above); fathers may fail to adequately support the child economically after divorce (factor 4); and fathers can assist their children in coping better with the divorce circumstances (factor 5) either by modeling good coping techniques or by doing what is possible to minimize the adversities the child most cope with. Even the child's relationship with the mother, which seemingly involves only the mother, and discussed in more detail in Forgatch (this volume), is nonetheless substantially impacted by fathers, since mothers report that one of the most stressful aspects of divorce that disturbs their

parenting is their relationship with their ex-husbands (Ahrons, 1981; Brandwein et al., 1974; Tschann et al., 1989). Thus, there is plausibly considerable benefit to children that will accrue by enhancing the fathering of their nonresidential parent.

Deficit Model vs Modifiable Potentiality

Much of the literature of the 1980s on divorced fathers adopted a deficit model, that emphasized the shortcomings and failures of divorced fathers. For example, the media is full of daily news stories about “deadbeat dads” (e.g., Davis, 2003; Weitzstein, 2003). Moreover, Furstenburg, Nord, Peterson & Zill (1983) reported that 49% of the children in their sample had not seen their nonresidential parent in the past year and that only one child in six averaged one or more contacts per week. Furstenburg and Nord (1985) suggest that this infrequent contact occurs because most of the fathers are only weakly attached to their children. Popenoe (1996), too, echoes this conclusion, writing that “male biology pulls men away from long-term parental investment...men are only weakly attached to the father role” (p. 173, 184). Furstenburg refers to these men as “bad dads” (1988) or “disappearing dads” (Furstenburg & Harris, 1992). A deficit perspective assumes that many or most divorced fathers are characterologically inept or uncaring fathers, who simply volitionally and irresponsibly abandon their emotional, financial, and physical involvement with their children without good – or any – cause.

In the present chapter, we refrain from adopting a deficit model. While its accuracy has certainly been called into question (Braver & O’Connell, 1998; Garfinkel, Miller, McLanahan & Hanson, 1998; Pasley & Minton, 1997; Hawkins & Dolahite, 1997; Schwartz, 2001; Parke & Brott, 1999), and its prominence in the more recent literature on fathers is rapidly diminishing, the primary justification for abandoning it is that it is simply not helpful or useful. Rather, the deficit approach leads to hand wringing, wholesale condemnations, and occasionally draconian

and coercive policies that have generally proven ineffective in promoting better fathering and thereby improving the lives of their children.

Since the goal of this chapter is to discuss how best to promote better fathering in divorced fathers, instead we review the literature on divorced fathers using the lens or filter of modifiable potentiality. By this term we mean we will search for factors or attributes that are modifiable, and have the potential to optimize divorced fathers' beneficial influence on their children's well-being. Focusing exclusively on the malleable and beneficial aspects of the father-child relationship allows for the development of parsimonious and streamlined programming. This is a constructive approach that builds strengths, and is far more hopeful than the deficit perspective which condemns weaknesses (Maton et al., in press). Rather than pursue inherent limitations and/or failures and deficits, we address capabilities and potential but unrealized strengths. What does the literature tell us is necessary and plausible to alter fathers' impact on children for the better? How can these changes best be accomplished? What programs are needed? What additional research would be required? Using this prospective, we hope to conclude with reasonable interventions that are feasible and can improve the relationship between fathers and their children.

The organization of the remainder of this chapter is as follows. First, we discuss the functions and roles of divorced fathers in the post-divorce family by reviewing what fathers do -- or fail to do -- after divorce and the impact these behaviors have on their children, the child's environment, and their relationship with the ex-spouse. After synthesizing this evidence, we propose the essential dimensions of divorced nonresidential parenting. Second, we attempt to explain variation among fathers in their fulfillment of their fathering responsibilities. In order to understand how best to enhance divorced fathering, we need to recognize what the "levers" are,

what factors contribute to or detract from adequate enactment of adaptive achievement of enhanced fathering. The search for what we term “modifiable potentiators” is aided by a theoretical perspective, so, in our third section, we discuss six theories that have been offered to predict father involvement and impact. Fourth, we draw this literature together into an integrated proposal for an intervention targeting the modifiable potentiators that has promise of promoting better fathering. Fifth, we discuss such a program we have designed, based on this review, called *Dads For Life*. Sixth, we present details of an experimental trial we have conducted to evaluate the impact of *Dads For Life*. Seventh, we briefly discuss the program’s encouraging preliminary results. Finally, we mention other promising programs to enhance divorced fathering, and we propose a research agenda on nonresidential fathering for the future.

The dimensions of divorced nonresidential fathering

Although things appear to be slowly changing (Meyer and Garasky, 1993; Cancian & Meyer, 1998), the vast majority of fathers become “nonresidential” parents after divorce, in the sense that their children will no longer reside with them for the majority of time. Current estimates are that, following divorce, 90% of children live primarily with their mothers, with the remainder roughly evenly divided between children who reside primarily with their fathers and those who are in “true” joint custody, spending virtually half of their time residing with each parent (Nord & Zill, 1997.) As many writers have pointed out (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1986; Blankenhorn, 1995; Stewart, 1999), the nonresidential parent role is one with a number of constraints that greatly interfere with “normal” parent-child relationships. Most obviously, the time with the child is substantially restricted by the visitation arrangement the decree specifies. This interferes with continuity: considerable time may have elapsed between visits and many events of important meaning to either parent or child may have occurred without mutually taking

note of them. Moreover, since disciplining often requires follow through (e.g., “grounding”), the father’s normal role in limit-setting and regulation cannot be effectively implemented. Next, parenting occurs in a solo parenting environment. The two parents, who may have reinforced and relieved each other before divorce, uncommonly do so after divorce. Also, the post-marital relationship may be strained or hostile, especially around the issues of visitation (Wolchik, Fenaughty & Braver, 1996; Kruk, 1993; Arendell, 1995), and childrearing (Braver & O’Connell, 1998; Lund, 1987; Fox, 1985; Fox & Blanton, 1995). Finally, unique to the post-divorce period, the father’s relationship to his children, especially his financial support, is a matter for governmental and legal scrutiny and control.

There is substantial agreement in the literature that these issues, combined with the normal stresses of the end of the marital relationship, exact a heavy emotional toll on divorced fathers (Albrecht, 1980; Bloom & Caldwell, 1981; Bloom, Asher & White, 1978; Chiraboga & Cutler, 1977; Price & McKenry, 1988; Reisman, 1990). In one early study, the suicide rate of recently divorced fathers was found to be greatly higher than non-divorced fathers as well as recently divorced mothers (Bloom, Asher & White, 1978). More recently, Umberson and Williams (1993) found that this psychological distress can be explained in large degree by the conflicts and role strains engendered by the confusion of the divorced-fathering role. An additional, and well-verified part of the distress is that it was the mother who wanted the marriage to end and initiated the divorce over the opposition of the father, oftentimes leaving the father confused by the divorce itself (Braver, Whitley & Ng, 1993; Pettit & Bloom, 1984; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Ahrons, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989.) Moreover, mother’s reported reasons for seeking the divorce were primarily because of interpersonal or emotional problems such as “differences in lifestyles or values” and “spouse not able or willing to meet my needs”

rather than matters which involve more blameworthy behavior such as domestic or substance abuse, or adultery (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Kitson, Babri & Roach, 1985; Gigy & Kelly, 1992) and, in turn, they do so primarily because they are confident that they will win full custody of the children (Brinig & Allen, 2000.)

As a result of these stresses, divorced fathers typically encounter great dislocations and substantial difficulty in being effective parents. Research has focused on four dimensions of father parenting that impact the long-term well-being of their children: (1) frequency of father-child contact; (2) father-child relationship quality; (3) father's financial support; and (4) quality of post-divorce mother-father relations.

Frequency. The typical visitation clause of a divorce decree allows nonresidential fathers contact only on alternating weekends (Lamb, 1997), effectively setting a maximum legal limit on contact. As noted, however, older research (e.g., Furstenburg & Nord, 1985; Amato, 1986; Hetherington & Hagan, 1986; Fulton, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982) had shown discouragingly low levels of contact, well below that allowed by the decree, and far too many fathers disengaging completely. However, more current research (Braver et al., 1991; Braver et al, 1993; Bray & Berger, 1990; Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1988; Seltzer, 1992) has shown higher levels of contact, and Cooksey & Craig (1998) have shown this to be a cohort difference (i.e, current generations of divorced fathers visit more.) Recent research (Fabricius & Hall, 2000) has also shown that both young adult children and their fathers reported that they had wished for more contact. More contact was precluded because the divorce decree conformed closely to their mother's desires mother's desires for more mother-child contact and, subsequently, less father-child contact.

Frequency of the father's contact alone has an inconsistent relationship to child-well

being, with some studies showing positive outcomes for children (e.g., Guidibaldi et al., 1986; Hetherington et al., 1978; 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), but others showing no effect or even negative effects (King, 1994; Seltzer, 1994; Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1994; Amato, 1993; Healy, Malley & Stewart, 1990; Furstenburg & Harris, 1993).

Quality. In contrast to the weak or inconsistent effects found for frequency of contact per se, quality of contact has more compelling effects on child well-being. In a meta-analysis of 63 published studies, Amato & Gilbreth (1999) found consistent positive effect sizes on children's well-being for fathers' authoritative parenting practices, such as limit setting, instrumental assistance, and talking about problems, and for fathers' emotional closeness to their children. For example, Simons, Whitbeck & Beaman (1994) found that fathers who praised children's accomplishments and disciplined them for misbehavior had adolescents who were better adjusted. Similarly, Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) found that adolescents who had strong emotional ties with their nonresident fathers were better adjusted. Of course, strong emotional ties and effective authoritative parenting are precluded with insufficient contact; in effect, quantity provides opportunity for quality. But for many divorced fathers whose decrees permit ample contact, these visits are restricted to dinners in restaurants and recreational activities (Stewart, 1999; Hetherington & Hagan, 1986), which appear ineffective in benefiting their children.

Financial Support. In addition to emotional support, another obligation of post-divorce fathers is to provide financial support to the child. After divorce this support primarily takes the form of child support, a court-ordered arrangement mandating that a certain amount be paid by the noncustodial parent to the custodial parent in support of the child. However, evidence shows that many nonresidential fathers fail to financially support their children (Peterson & Nord, 1990;

Teachman & Paasch, 1993; Pearson & Thoennes, 1986; Beller & Graham, 1993; Meyer, 1997; Sorenson, 1997). Several of the large national studies have also found that adequate payment of child support is related to better child outcomes, such as better grades and less school dropout (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; King, 1994; Seltzer, 1994; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998; Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1994). In a meta-analysis, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) showed that this relationship held up over all published studies. Some intriguing recent evidence found, however, that child support payment might be a proxy for fathers' demonstration of high concern about and regard for their children that is also transmitted in other ways. For example, child support that is voluntary or otherwise uncoerced is better for children because it conveys more concern and love than mandated or ordered child support (Hernandez, Beller & Graham, 1995; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998).

Interparental Conflict. While the previous three factors mentioned concerned the father's relationship and actions relevant to the child, the final dimension of father's impact is a bit less direct, but no less potent. It concerns the nonresidential father's relationship to the mother. Studies indicate that most divorcing couples with children tend to experience high levels of conflict immediately after the divorce (Fulton, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982) and that high levels of conflict and hostility commonly persist for three years or more after the divorce is final (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1986; Pearson & Thoennes, 1988; Masheter, 1991). After that, the majority of couples appear to disengage from protracted conflict and instead go into a parallel parenting mode (Ahrons, 1994; King & Heard, 1999; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) or, more beneficially, become "co-parental" (Ahrons, 1981; Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Whiteside, 1998). Perhaps 25%, however, persist in high conflict more or less indefinitely (Ahrons, 1994).

Data suggest that the effects of divorce on children are exacerbated by high levels of

conflict between the parents of the divorced child (Emery, 1982; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Amato & Rezac, 1994) and meta-analyses have shown such conflict to be among the leading stressors for children of divorce and best predictors of child maladjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Such findings are not surprising given the large and consistent body of research showing the association between conflict in married couples and the elevated risk of children (e.g., Cummings, 1998; Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Particularly damaging to children is conflict between parents that the child witnesses. Conflict witnessed by children is associated with conduct problems, anxiety and depression; between 9% and 25% of children's externalizing problems are accounted for by marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 1994); this increased risk may result from decreased parenting efficacy (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Interdependence of the Dimensions. Although the four foregoing dimensions of fathering have been discussed separately, they are empirically interdependent. For example, we have already noted that frequency of contact puts a ceiling on quality of contact. Fathers are unlikely to develop an authoritative relationship with their child, nor to maintain close emotional ties, if they visit too infrequently. Studies have also shown a strong correlation between visiting (both quality and frequency) and child support (Seltzer, 1992; Seltzer, Schaeffer & Charng, 1989; Peterson & Nord, 1990; Furstenburg et al., 1983; Pearson & Thoennes, 1986; Braver et al., 1993). Explanations of this later finding have ranged from the idea that paying is the causal factor (Weiss & Willis, 1985), since fathers who are forced to pay will want to look in on their investment; that visiting is the causal factor, because it induces an urge to shelter and financially enhance the child (Chambers, 1979; Tropf, 1984); to that some third variable accounts for the relationship between visiting and child support compliance. Seltzer, Schaeffer and Charng

(1989) suggest the factor might be a sense of paternal responsibility, while Braver et al., (1993) have presented evidence that it is a sense of perceived control over post-divorce issues that causes both visiting and paying.

Finally, there is an empirical link between each of the above dimensions and interparental conflict. For example, researchers have found correlations between post-divorce interparental conflict and the quality of children's relationships with nonresidential fathers. Conflict with the ex-spouse seems to account for significant variance in the amount (Ahrns, 1981; Hetherington et al., 1976; Koch & Lowery, 1984; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Tschann et al., 1989) and quality of fathers' post-separation involvement with their children. One explanation for these findings is that post-divorce interparental conflict often involves childrearing issues (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1986; Clingempeel, 1981), which may make children a direct target of parental anger or draw children into the conflict as intermediaries. Also, because interparental conflicts in the post-divorce period tend to focus on visitation arrangements and other child-related matters, these conflicts may be particularly threatening to child self-esteem and mental health (Kurdek, 1981; Wolchik, Braver & Sandler, 1985).

The four dimensions may be linked in some as yet undiscovered causal sequence. For example, in the Tschann et al. (1989) study, the effect of conflict levels on child adjustment were mediated by the quality of parent-child relationships after the divorce. Each of the aforementioned dimensions has implications for child well-being, and fortunately their interconnectedness has encouraging implications for intervention. Plausibly, for example, an intervention attempting to enhance the post-divorce mother-father relationship might have salutary unintended benefits for the father-child relationship or for the payment of child support. While a more circumspect intervention strategy would be to try to impact each and every one of

the dimensions independently, it is certainly plausible that an intervention targeting only one will have ramifying beneficial effects on the others. Also plausible is that a failed intervention effort to directly alter one dimension can nonetheless find success because another one of the correlated dimensions was successfully improved.

The voluntary component of child support compliance seems strongly related to the other three dimensions; however, it is also strongly related to fathers' income or employment (Peters, Argys, Maccoby & Mnookin, 1993) and with new enforcement mechanisms such as automatic wage withholding (Meyer, 1997), support is frequently paid non-voluntarily. As a result, we focus instead on the two primary dimensions: the relationship with the child (which for future purposes subsumes both quantity and quality) and relationship with the mother/ex-spouse.

Modifiable Potentiators of Nonresidential Fathering.

The two primary dimensions of fathering outlined above, father-child relationships, and father-mother relationships, are clearly the ones that can affect children's outcomes and should be investigated. Next, we need to understand what contributes to variation in those two dimensions. What is it about some fathers and families that leads fathering to be both frequent and effective, and relationships with the mother to be co-parental and cooperative, while other fathers have disengaged or have consistently hostile relationships with the mothers, to the child's detriment? Again, we have exclusive interest in the aspects of fathers' postdivorce relations, whether moderators or mediators, that are modifiable by interventions and beneficial to children.

There has now accumulated an appreciable empirical literature that investigates correlates of how well fathers visit and pay child support, how satisfied or outraged they are by the new post-divorce arrangements, and how much conflict versus cooperation characterizes their relationships with their ex-wives. Several authors (e.g., Arendell, 1995; Kruk, 1992) have

conducted primarily qualitative or ethnographic investigations, while others (e.g., McKenry; Braver et al, 1993; Rettig, Leichtentritt and Stanton, 1999) have used quantitative methodologies with either regional or national data sets. Before attempting to summarize this literature to derive a set of modifiable potentiators, we describe the work that has attempted to synthesize these factors into theories of father-child relationships.

Theories of Post-Divorce Fathering.

Interactionist-Feminist Theory. Arendell (1992a; 1992b; 1994; 1995) adopts an interactionist-feminist vantage point in interpreting results from her qualitative study of 75 recently divorced nonresident fathers. The dominant theme she recorded was one of fathers' rage at the legal system and at their ex-wives. The large majority of her interviewees experienced "injustice, discrimination, resistance, and frustration and discontent". Most of these, "passionately committed to resisting perceived oppression, ... had very limited, if any, relationships with their children" (1995, p. 16-17). Generally unsympathetic to their plight, however, Arendell dismissed their complaints as "masculinist discourse" and just "rhetoric".

Family Systems Theory. Arditti and Kelly (1994) formulated a family systems perspective, which focused on fathers' interdependence in their relationship with their ex-wives. They found that fathers whose relationships with their ex-wives was closer and involved less conflict had better relationships with their children. An important factor, reminiscent of Arendell's findings, was satisfaction with custody and visitation arrangements. Those who felt these matters were unjust and unsatisfactory had poorer relationships both with their children and their ex-wives (cf., Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000; 2002).

Role-Identity Theory. Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley and Buehler (1993) developed a "mid-range" role-identity theory, in which the principle theoretical predictor of father involvement and

child well-being was posited to be father's parenting role identity. However, the effect of this role identity was theorized to be moderated by a number of factors, including the co-parental relationship, mother's views of his parenting, his emotional well-being, and the encouragement he received from others to engage in parenting. The theorists empirically tested the postulates of the theory, as did Minton and Pasley (1996) and Stone and McKenry (1998). All found support for the theory, but, like previous theorists, Stone and McKenry also found dissatisfaction with the legal system and the custody and visitation arrangements to detract from how well father role identity predicted involvement.

Role-Enactment Theory. Based on the preceding finding, Leite and McKenry (2002) reformulated the above theory into role-enactment theory, in which role satisfaction and "institutional role clarity" (involving clearly specified legal arrangements for custody and visitation) were added as predictors. They tested their model with the National Survey of Families and Households national data set (Sweet, Bumpass & Call, 1988). Consistent with the theoretical assumptions, father's low involvement with their children was related to ongoing conflict with the mother, to greater geographic distance from children, and to a lack of clarity about how they should behave in their parenting role.

Resource Theory. Rettig, Leichtentritt and Stanton (1999) used Foa and Foa's resource theory (1980) as the basis of their model. According to this notion, people exchange resources through give and take between individuals. Behaviors and satisfaction, as a result, are a function of how these resource exchanges flow between partners. Involvement with children was, thus, theorized to be related to the father's own perceived economic and social psychological well-being, his communication with the mother during co-parenting, and their degree of conflict. Results supported the theory

Social Exchange Theory Braver, et al. (1993a) formulated a theory closely related to resource theory, social exchange theory. The fundamental notion is that in deciding how much of an investment to make in a specific relationship, such as the father's relationship to the child, one implicitly calculates the rewards of that relationship in comparison to its costs. The more positive the reward-cost ratio, the more invested in the relationship the individual will be. Potential rewards to the father include the father's idea that his relationship is valuable to the child, his commitment to the fathering role, and supports he receives for the relationship from significant others. Costs include conflict with the ex-spouse, awkward or disturbing visits, dissatisfaction with the divorce arrangements, and his perceived lack of control over the post-divorce relationship with the child. The model was strongly supported in longitudinal analyses by Braver et. al., (1993b).

Synthesizing the Findings to Spotlight Modifiable Potentiators of the Dimensions of Fathering

Tests of the above theories, as well as less theoretical, more exploratory empirical investigations by Dudley (1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1996), Kruk (1991a; 1991b; 1992; 1993), Arditti (1990; 1991; 1992a; 1992b; Arditti & Allen, 1993; Arditti & Keith, 1993), Hoffman (1995) and McKenry (McKenry, Price, Fine & Serovich, 1991; McKenry, KcKelvey, Leigh & Wark, 1996) and others have yielded information about a number of variables significantly related to enhanced fathering (i.e., father-child and father-mother relationships) across several studies. Several of the factors that have predicted father involvement and effectiveness are not ready candidate variables for interventions, however. For example, having substantial economic or educational resources emerges as a predictor of positive involvement in several studies (e.g., Rettig, Leichtentritt and Stanton, 1999; Stone & McKenry, 1998), but are not readily modified or improved by any plausible intervention. Other variables in this category include geographic

barriers, emotional health, and having obtained favorable custody and visitation arrangements, or at least being satisfied with the arrangements one has. On the other hand, the following factors that are plausibly modifiable by an intervention have been related to better fathering and greater child well-being consistently across studies: a strong fathering role identity, or strong commitment to the fathering role; an authoritative parenting orientation; an understanding of how to effectively parent in nonresidential mode; cooperation vs conflict with the ex-spouse; support from the ex-spouse for continued involvement with the child; and support for continued involvement with the child from important others. We slightly recategorize these as follows:

Commitment to the Parental Role. Many studies have indicated that level of commitment to the role of parent is a strong predictor of level of father involvement with his children after divorce (e.g., Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981; Tepp, 1983; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley and Buehler, 1993; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Stone & McKenry, 1998). For example, Tepp (1983) found that a sense of responsibility to the children was significantly correlated with amount of visitation. Data also indicate that father's withdrawal from their children tends to occur gradually, as they feel increasingly unimportant or unrewarded for their efforts (Fulton, 1979; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Most fathers initially feel a reasonably high level of interest in contact with their children (Kruk, 1992; Hetherington et al., 1978), but this level sometimes decreases due to inadequate coping with the difficulties of visitation, such as hampered or difficult visitation arrangements, escalated child misbehavior, or conflict with the ex-spouse (Wolchik, Fenaughty and Braver, 1996; Braver et al., 1991). As a coping response, a father may decide to sacrifice his relationship with the children, without fully considering the implications of this choice. Thus, we hypothesize that any process of withdrawal from the commitment to the parenting role may be interrupted by an intervention that presents factual information on the importance of a positive

father-child relationship to children's well-being, and an emotional appeal which vividly demonstrates children's emotional vulnerability and need for paternal support.

Skills for Nonresidential Parenting. Many divorced fathers complain about the difficulty of parenting as an infrequent and non-primary parent. However, the literature is clear (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) that positive child outcomes accrue with a warm and authoritative nonresidential parenting style. Two decades of research have also shown that both parental warmth and effectiveness in limit setting can be enhanced by parenting skills training interventions, which aim at emphasizing communication skills, the use of positive reinforcement, and non-coercive limit setting (e.g. appropriate commands, logical consequences, and time-out from reinforcement) (Baum & Forehand, 1981; Webster-Stratton, 1984; Spaccarelli, Cotler, & Penman, 1992; Patterson, Chamberlin & Reid, 1982; Reid, Taplin & Loeber, 1981). Also, because parenting skill and effectiveness are influenced by stressful events in parents' lives, many parent training programs have been specifically geared to parents who recently experienced a stressor such as spouse death (Sandler et al., 1992). Wolchik et al., (1993; 2002) and Forgatch (this volume) taught parenting skills to recently divorced custodial mothers and find that these skills can be significantly improved through preventive intervention, and that they are important mediators of adjustment for children of divorce, yielding remarkable improvements in child outcomes even six years later (Wolchik et al., 2002).

Unfortunately, most of the research on parenting programs has excluded fathers. Coplin and Houts (1991) reviewed 35 studies on behavioral parent training published between 1981 and 1988 and found that only 13 included any fathers as subjects. One notable exception is the work of Webster-Stratton and colleagues, in which parents with conduct-disordered children were trained in a variety of parenting skills through videotape modeling (Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff,

& Hollingsworth, 1988). These investigators have found that fathering skills (measured via home observational data) were significantly improved by the videotape modeling program in combination with therapist led group discussion, and also by a self-administered version of the videotape program (Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollingsworth, 1988; Webster-Stratton, Hollingsworth, & Kolpacoff, 1989). Thus, we hypothesize that an intervention that teaches parenting skills and tailors them to the demands and constraints of the nonresidential parent situation can successfully overcome the obstacles to nonresidential parenting and both keep fathers involved and increase the child's well-being.

Fathers' Motivation and Skills for Conflict Management with the Ex-Spouse. Perhaps the most consistent yet multi-faceted factor found in the literature to be related to fathering after divorce is the relationship to the ex-spouse. A conflictual relationship is deleterious to all three parties, yet ramifies into myriad domains (Wolchik, Fenaughty & Braver, 1996). For example, the conflict level is strongly related to whether the mother supports the father's continued involvement (Kruk, 1993; Arditti, 1992; Seltzer, 1994). And, as Braver and O'Connell (1998) put it: "The most important pathway [to father involvement] is having an ex-wife who desires the father to be connected to the child, who supports and encourages his involvement, as compared to one who wants the father altogether out of the way" (p. 175). Thus an extremely important modifiable potentiator to target for an intervention is motivation and skill to reduce or manage conflict with the child's mother.

Despite its potential importance, there is little in the literature that offers encouragement that this can be successfully accomplished. Several projects proposed a more modest goal, teaching fathers to "keep the child out of the war zone", i.e., not to argue with their ex-spouses when children are present. (Kurkowski et al., 1993; Wolchik et al., 1993). This theoretically can

be accomplished by providing vivid illustrations of the effect of conflict on children of divorce. However, there have been no successful attempts we are aware of in the literature to actually decrease overall levels post-divorce conflict and promote better co-parenting. A promising candidate approach is the stress inoculation training approach (Meichenbaum, 1975) that helps people accomplish goals even while experiencing stress; for example, when a father feels provoked by the ex-wife. This approach teaches parents to better understand and manage situations that prompt intense anger (Moon & Eisler, 1983; Novaco, 1977). Anger management skills training based on the stress inoculation model focuses the trainee on 1) increasing awareness of personal anger process (e.g. identification of specific situations, thoughts, and cues that initiate and maintain the response), 2) identifying, challenging, and modifying irrational thoughts (using thought-stopping and self-talk) that lead to loss of control, and 3) learning alternative coping strategies such as relaxation, assertiveness, and problem-solving. It has been shown that this approach can even be effective with men at high-risk for domestic violence (Deschner & McNeil, 1986).

Fathers' Perceived Control over the Divorce Process. Finally, we believe an intervention to promote better nonresidential fathering should target countering their sense of helplessness and powerlessness noted by so many researchers (Arditti, 1992; Arendell, 1995; Arditti & Allen 1993; Arditti, 1992; Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Kruk, 1992; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Increasing perceptions of control, we hypothesize, will tend both to increase quality of involvement with the children and to decrease interparental conflict. Studies indicate that fathers' perceptions of control over family issues are affected by the divorce settlement and/or its implementation (e.g. visitation arrangements, child-rearing decisions) and are strongly related to their level of post-divorce involvement with the children, by far the strongest predictor of the 27

Braver et al., (1993) studied. Father's perceived control was also an important predictor of the level of post-divorce conflict between parents (Bay & Braver, 1990). This finding suggests that fathers who believe they have little control over post-divorce family life may also be angrier and have greater difficulty getting along with their ex-spouse. Furthermore, if these fathers believe that visitation will inevitably result in negative interactions with their ex-wife, one coping choice would be to skip visitation, and thereby sacrifice their relationship with the children. These effects of perceived control theoretically provide an important focus for intervening with fathers to reduce interparental conflict. Instilling a sense of control in the father may also reduce general post-marital distress, resulting in less interparental conflict.

One way to attempt to counter the powerlessness often experienced by noncustodial parents is by focusing on those areas in which they do in fact exert substantial control. Specifically, we hypothesize that it is important to teach fathers that they have ample opportunity to impact the child's life while the child is in their care on visits. In addition, if the father masters an interpersonal encounter with their ex-wife by using conflict management skills in their repertoire instead of giving in to the impulse to show anger or escalate, they have demonstrated a great deal of control. One could also focus on perceptions of secondary, as well as primary control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Primary control reflects action by an individual used to gain control over the environment in order to be consistent with wishes or desires, whereas secondary control reflects attempts by the individual to recognize and mentally adjust to environmental events or situations over which they have no or limited control. In effect, secondary control, while appearing passive, allows the individual to cope with an uncontrollable situation. Recent work has shown that individuals can be taught how to adjust to and recognize the difference between those events in which action can or should be taken, and those events or

situations that are undesirable and nonmalleable (e.g., decisions or prejudices of judges), yet can be understood and mastered via secondary control processes (Reich & Zautra, 1990).

Designing an Intervention to Impact These Modifiable Potentiators: *Dads For Life*.

We developed an intervention program that targeted the above four modifiable potentiators. With the aid of a five-year NIMH grant, we designed a program for nonresidential fathers with the goal of benefiting children's well-being by promoting better nonresidential father behaviors. Our program, *Dads For Life* (DFL), consisted of 10 sessions in all, 8 1-3/4 hour group sessions occurring weekly, in the evening, and 2 individual sessions of 3/4 hour each. The material presented and method of group leadership was heavily scripted and manualized for ease of export. The core of each group session was specially developed videotaped material of about 10 minutes each, using professional child and adult actors. The videotape, called *Eight Short Films About Divorced Fathers*, was emotionally and dramatically powerful yet didactically sound. Literature has shown videotape to be an efficacious change modality (Mayadas & Duehn, 1977; Golub et al., 1987; O'Dell et al., 1980; O'Dell et al., 1982; Webster-Stratton, 1984). In general, the videotapes were used by the group leader to either introduce a topic, or reiterate it through a different medium. For most skills, two-person vignettes modeled one incorrect and one correct example of the skill being utilized in common post-divorce situations faced by nonresidential fathers. All the videotapes were constructed with special attention to the needs of ethnic minority families, both in terms of the ethnicity and race of the actors, but also in terms of the cultural context of the issues. For example, in one video in which the Latino parents were fighting, the issues about which the fight occurred were appropriate for the Latin culture and the actors reverted to yelling in Spanish.

Table 1 contains a summary of session contents. The first session provides a program

overview and reviews normal processes that are associated with divorce (normalizing).

Considerable attention is given to motivating fathers to maintain regular attendance in the program. It also focuses on the two modifiable potentiators of increasing commitment to the parenting role and enhancing parenting skills (encouraging the fathers to introduce special family time and one on one time as strategies for building a relationship between fathers and their children). The videotape accomplishes the former goal by presenting information on father's impact on children by both summarizing research findings and expert opinions about the effects of father absence on children and by having children share feelings about visitation (e.g. fears of losing dad, sensitivity to missed visitations) which emphasize their emotional attachment to father. Sessions 2 and 3 are devoted to the modifiable potentiator of enhanced parenting skills. Session 2 works on listening and communication skills, such as being ready and open to the child's attempt to communicate, while Session 3 works on discipline strategies. The videotapes of Session 2 model giving reassurance, using active listening, etc., while those of Session 3 model clear communication of behavioral expectations. Sessions 4-5 deal with the two modifiable potentiators of building the motivation and skills for conflict management and enhancing perceived control. Session 4 focuses initially on the consequences of conflict on the child, then the fathers are taught the importance of keeping the kids out of the war zone. The remainder of session 4 is devoted to emphasizing self-control, and controlling high-risks topics and situations. Session 5 again focuses on self-control, and then teaches very specific engagement skills for de-escalating conflict with the ex-wife. Videotaped vignettes on control show how, by assuming control over the situation, both he and the child will have better adjustment. Other material teaches the concept of secondary control, i.e., mentally adjusting to events over which they have limited control (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Videotape scenes on

conflict management illustrate the specific skills for anger control (Anderson, Fodor & Alpert, 1976). In short, Sessions 4 and 5 consisted of a series of exercises that taught each father to refrain from enacting behaviors that would otherwise escalate the conflict and to minimize the behaviors his ex-wife may be expecting him to do that increases animosity. Specifically, we got fathers to show attending behaviors (e.g., looking), reduce contemptuous behaviors (e.g., eye roll), and in general, acknowledge the issue being discussed. Notice that we were not trying to get him to change his ex-wife's behavior, nor did we ask him to do something radically different. Instead we requested a few simple attending behaviors, and we asked that he give her views a respectful hearing. Preliminary data from our pilot studies indicate that these were behaviors that, if not performed, seem to instigate animosity and negative behavior cycles during interactions (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Session 6 returns to the modifiable potentiator of parenting skills, primarily working with effective discipline techniques such as positive reinforcement. The videotaped segments teach limit setting, imposing consequences, etc. Session 7 returns to the modifiable potentiator of building commitment to the parenting role. Specifically addressed here are manifestations of that commitment such as maintaining child support payments and maintaining a consistent visitation pattern. The videotaped segments describe the importance of the father's visits from the child's perspective. The final Session addresses maintenance of acquired skills and problem solving. Also covered is where to acquire additional information about parenting, especially handling developmental changes. We provide fathers with extensive reference material covering the divorce process, and material about local (Phoenix area) educational and recreational facilities for children.

Each session was accompanied by homework assignments, and considerable practice at skill-acquisition. Each group session consisted of didactic teaching, group discussions, and role

playing.

Individual Sessions: Two individual sessions are also scheduled, at Weeks 3 and 6. One of these deals with the relationship with the ex-wife and the other with the parent-child dyad. In the individual sessions, the fathers were helped to develop individualized strategies for ensuring that they would succeed in implementing program skills into their particular family situations (Lambermon & van Ijzendoorn, 1989). Leaders help problem solve to remove obstacles to appropriate use of program material.

Group Leaders. The group sessions were led by a team of one male and one female Master's level counselors. Leaders participated in ten 3-hour training sessions prior to beginning, and had weekly supervision meetings led by an experienced Ph.D. level clinician.

Evaluating Dads For Life

In order to evaluate the preventive effect of DFL on children of divorce, an experimental evaluation was conducted, with fathers being assigned at random either into DFL or a self-study control condition. Evaluation involved standardized assessments of children's behavior problems, using father-, mother-, child-, and teacher-reports at pre-test and three follow-up waves: an immediate post-test, four month follow-up (chosen based on our estimates about how long it would take any changes in father's behavior to affect or be recognizable to mother and child) and a one-year follow-up. Primary participants were 214 recently divorced fathers, 127 in DFL, 87 in control. In addition, evaluation data was obtained from the ex-wives of these men, as well as from one child (the "target" child) and the child's teacher, when the child was of sufficient age. Potential participants were identified through public court divorce records, including computerized child support files. Initial eligibility requirements included that the couple's legal divorce was between 4-10 months ago, that they had at least one child between the

ages of 4 and 12, that the mother had primary physical custody and that both parents continued to reside in the geographic area. Fathers we were successful in contacting by phone were informed of the potential benefits of participation, but were cautioned to decline participation unless they could commit to complete whichever of the two conditions randomness (an actual lottery) dictated. Forty-seven percent agreed to participate in either DFL or the home study control condition (see below) and to accept random assignment to either. Families were told in advance about the follow-up assessments, and tentatively volunteered to participate in these, as well. The assignment to condition was achieved at the orientation; the father himself drew the lot that assigned his condition, a procedure designed to improve commitment and decreased attrition (Wortman, Hendricks & Hillis, 1976.)

In addition to the self-report measures we also collected observational data that included a problem solving task involving the ex-spouses and a father-child task. Of the 214 families, a sub-sample of couples agreed (27 DFL and 16 control) to be videotaped while having a 15-minute problem solving discussion about post-divorce child rearing and scheduling problems. Dyadic interactions were assessed across the 4 waves of data collection. For each interaction we coded Verbal Negative, Problem Solution, Verbal Agree, Back Channel, Head Nod, Eye Gaze and Eye Roll using a variant of the MICSEASE coding system (Griffin, Greene, and Decker-Haas, 2003). As part of the observation assessment, each member of the dyad provided a real-time rating of his or her affect during the interaction (see Griffin, 1993, for details). This allows us to combine the traditional observation codes with an internal affect reference in assessing the quality and structure of post-divorce dyadic interactions.

Self-Study Placebo Control Group. Fathers assigned at random to this condition, which we described for them as the “home version” of DFL, received by mail a copy of what we deemed

as the best self-help books available at the time¹, Divorced Fathers: Reconstructing a Quality Life (Oakland, 1984) and Divorced Dad Dilemma (Mayer, 1994). These books offer practical advice to divorced fathers on four major areas, including 1) personal life adjustment, 2) improvement of existing relationships with children, 3) establishment of a separate home, and 4) constructive methods for handling legal matters connected with divorce.

Preliminary Results of the DFL Randomized Trial

We will report here preliminary results on the child adjustment measures and some of the modifiable potentiators as assessed only on mothers and fathers (i.e, we will not report on teacher- or child-report outcomes). Since we wished in the analysis to look for patterns over the post-test waves, the analysis needed to allow examination of trends over these periods. Furthermore, since similar prevention programs (e.g., Wolchik et al., 2000; 2002) have disclosed that the impact of the treatment often depends on the level of difficulties the child displays at pre-test, we needed to choose an analysis that had the capability to detect “baseline by treatment” interactions. That is, we wished to be able to recognize whether the differences between DFL and control effects were different depending on the levels of initial (pre-test) problems. These data-analytic considerations led us to the random coefficient analysis or “mixed model” (programmed on SAS PROC MIXED.)

We found such a significant baseline by treatment interaction for both mother’s and father’s report of child internalizing problems, as well as for mother’s report of total problems on the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). For each dependent variable, graphs disclosed that children in the DFL condition had less of such problems than control children, but this occurred

¹ Several books we regard as superior have subsequently been published (Bernstein, Worth & Worth, 1997; Brott, 1999; Condrell & Small, 1998; Feuer, 1997; Klatte, 1999; Knox & Legett, 2000; McClure & Saffer, 2000; Prengel & Yale, 1999; Wasson & Heffner, 2002).

primarily for children who were initially more troubled. We also found that families in the DFL condition had less interparental conflict (according to father's report; again the impact of DFL was most pronounced for families who were initially highly conflicted) and were more co-parental, according to mother's report (Braver, Griffin, Cookston, Sandler & Williams, 2001.)

A subset of the couples also interacted live for behavioral observation. Initial analyses of the affect rating data taken from this interaction task clearly show that dyads containing a father who had been assigned to the DFL group reported significantly higher (positive) affect than those couples containing a control group father. Using a PROC MIC procedure, and using the Pre-test affect rating as a covariate, these significant group differences were sustained through Wave 4 (Griffin, Braver & Cookston, 2003).

Conclusions and An Agenda For the Future

In sum, preliminary results with DFL are encouraging. We had hoped to secure better outcomes for children of divorce by advancing the parenting characteristics of their nonresidential father. Preliminary indications are that we were successful, primarily by impacting the relationship between father and mother.

Of course, we need to continue our analyses, adding reports by the children and teacher, and we need to probe and refine our understanding of which of the modifiable potentiators are responsible for our effects. But assuming that more conclusive analyses support our preliminary ones, how does DFL compare to other actual or potential programs for this population? While there is some anecdotal indication that other programs for nonresidential fathers exist, spurred by the support of The Fatherhood Initiative funding, only two others are in the published literature, and neither has impressive empirical support. Devlin et al. (1992) have developed an intervention which addresses unique parenting issues faced by divorced fathers. The only

significant effect found for the Devlin et al. (1992) intervention was a tendency to increase fathers' sense of competence in the parenting role; however, methodological weaknesses make it difficult to draw conclusions as to the effectiveness of this program in changing fathers' behaviors. The study did not employ random assignment to conditions or use observational measures of fathering behavior, and it involved a small sample with substantial opportunity for self-selection biases. Similarly, Hall and Kelly (1996) discuss a “counseling group” for nonresidential fathers that has similar content and structure as DFL; no evaluation of the program is described.

What should be the future research agenda to promote better fathering among divorced nonresident fathers? What are the advances in knowledge concerning nonresidential divorced fathers we will need in the coming years to expand our understanding, and to improve outcomes for children? We begin by specifying a potential agenda that we do not see as helpful.

Although coming from a variety of theoretical and ideological traditions, there is remarkable uniformity in the findings of most researchers. The same issues, variables and predictors surface from study to study; thus there is considerable consensus about what the important variables are. The theories are similar and complementary enough that the results in support of one theory can also largely be regarded as simultaneously supporting the others. Accordingly, we do not see additional theoretical development or clarification as being a priority for subsequent research. Analogously, we do not see it as useful to attempt to empirically support theory one at the expense of another, to develop critical tests between them, nor even to attempt to make distinctions at a purely theoretical or conceptual level. Moreover, because of considerable replication of findings concerning predictors, we would not assign priority to additional “psychosocial” non-intervention research, the kind that would give program

developers more ideas about what variables are the important ones to attempt to change to reap positive benefits for children and parents; we believe we already know what variables are critical.

Instead, we recommend the following areas as the focus for additional research. First, the causal relationship among these variables is still very open to question and is a priority for future research to untangle. An excellent example is the causal primacy of the conflictual relationship between the parents, identified as crucial by so many of the studies. Are parents in conflict because of residual anger concerning the marital break-up, because they disagree about parenting, because fathers visit too much or too little, because of child support, etc., or are the causal relationships the reverse? Since almost all the studies in the literature are cross-sectional correlational studies, all of these and more remain plausible interpretations of the results, whatever the theoretical preferences of the investigators or whether analytic techniques such as path analysis (which are sometimes wrongly taken to imply causality) are used. More cross-sectional correlational studies, no matter how carefully designed and executed, can not presume to clarify these matters, and thus should be given lower priority. In contrast, both longitudinal studies and experimental designs can dissect the processes to illuminate the causal sequences and should be preferred. While a few longitudinal studies were among those reviewed above, and while they clearly offer more promise than cross-sectional correlational investigations in untangling causal linkages, they only do so conclusively if the timing of the study waves matches well with the “causal lags” (McCleary & Welsh, 1992). That is, only if the longitudinal researchers were perspicacious or fortunate enough to time a study wave shortly after the next causal micro-process has taken effect, and only if there were limited causal circularity, would one be able to properly infer the causal chain with analyses.

Here is where the enormous advantage of experimental investigations may be leveraged. An experimental study in which the investigator is successful at reducing (for example) interparental conflict on a randomly selected portion of the sample is able more adeptly and conclusively to trace the causal impact of that reduced conflict on the remaining variables. Thus, for this reason especially, as well as to improve the outcomes for divorced families, we call for more experimental studies of fathering in divorced families (cf., Sandler, et al., in press.)

Second, while it is quite clear what variables to attempt to change, it is far less clear how, exactly, to change them. Again, conflict between the parents is a clear example. Many specialists in parenting have observed that, if we could only make (married or divorced) parents get along better, their children would do better (not to mention the parents themselves). However, it is far more difficult to find an effective intervention technique for ameliorating conflict than to recognize that we need one. This is even more obvious with divorced families, who have less motivation to stifle conflict than still-married ones, and for whom their quite distinct and rival interests and their bout with the adversarial legal system, in addition to whatever relationship factors and events drove them to dissolve their marriage, contribute to conflict levels. Thus, finding an intervention that shows significant evidence of reducing interparental conflict is rare in the literature (Goodman et al., in press), though we were apparently quite successful in doing so DFL. Research that searches for and finds more powerful and consistent change techniques for any of the modifiable potentiators should be high on the agenda.

Third, future research can address the wisdom of separately developing or needing or integrating programs for divorced mothers, for divorced fathers, and for their children. If we successfully intervene with one party, is there potential benefit in also intervening with either or both of the other two family members? If so, to what degree do the separate interventions need to

be coordinated and/or integrated? There are hints in data analyzed by me and my colleagues that there will be incremental benefits to intervening with both mother and father, but not also with their children, and only in some but not all cases. This important but complicated question needs more research attention, as does the question of how does one know when each intervention component is needed or preferred.

Finally, a critical, formidable but familiar issue for Family Psychology more generally is how to incorporate DFL or similar research-based programs into regular practice (Rotherum-Borus & Duan, 2003). Transporting interventions that have been shown to be efficacious in rigorous studies into the community for widespread deployment is one of the most vexing and recurring yet unsolved and even unapproached problems in psychology. It is also one of the highest priorities of the NIMH research agenda (Lamb et al., 1998; NAMHC, 1998; NAMHC, 2001). A promising avenue for interventions with divorced families is to partner with family courts for dissemination of their programs (Braver, Hipke, Ellman & Sandler, in press). Courts can readily identify all divorcing families, and have very substantial authority over them, far more so than courts have over other law-abiding citizens. Family courts have also quite recently begun supplementing their traditional roles as adjudicators by greatly expanding their social service and education roles (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999.) Moreover, surveys have shown they are interested in expanding their programming of the DFL type of program (Cookston et al., 2002; Arbuthnot, 2002). Whether one can successfully embed DFL or similar programs within a court system, and if so, how to do so while preserving both the efficacy of the intervention and the family's legal rights, are tricky but crucial dissemination problems that remain to be solved. In this context, it is obvious that special attention needs to be paid to the appropriateness of any intervention for the various cultural and ethnic groups that

come under the court's authority. It would be wise for programs to face this contingency early, in the program development stage, as did DFL, and to continually evaluate whether modifications are needed to preserve the cultural competence.

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Dads For Life Program Overview

MEETING I. Remodeling Your Life

Film: "Being There"

- ♦ Introduction
- ♦ Effects of divorce on children and fathers
- ♦ Special Family Time
- ♦ One-on-One Time

MEETING II. Catching Your Kids' Messages

Film: "Field of Dreams"

- ♦ Listening

MEETING III. Checking Kids' Messages and Getting Clear on Yours

Film: "Careful, He Might Hear You"

- ♦ Listening
- ♦ Discipline — Part I

MEETING IV. Keeping Kids Out of the War Zone

Film: "Shot Through the Heart"

- ♦ Conflict — Part I
- ♦ Self-Control

MEETING V. Reducing Conflict

Film: "Blue in the Face"

- ♦ Conflict — Part II
- ♦ Engagement & De-escalation

MEETING VI. Following Through on Discipline

Film: "Five Easy Pieces"

- ♦ Discipline — Part II

MEETING VII. Magic and Romance

Film: "Fear of Flying"

- ♦ Problem-solving
- ♦ Dating & Relationships

MEETING VIII. Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Film: "In the Middle of the Night in a Dark House Somewhere in the World."