

## Parent's move after split called harmful

Study: Kids of divorce may suffer long-term if Mom or Dad far away

By **KAREN PATTERSON**  
Staff Writer

Children of divorce whose parents don't live near each other may be at risk for long-term problems, among them greater hostility, less financial support for college and perhaps poorer health, new research suggests.

The study, by scientists at Arizona State University in Tempe, provides an unprecedented snapshot of the impact of a broken home with far-flung pieces vs. one in which the parents stay geo-

graphically close.

"There's been a lot written about the difficulty of making relocation decisions," said Dallas psychologist Richard Warshak. "But what's been lacking is any study specifically on how relocation affects children."

"What we found is that when children whose parents have divorced experience a move away of either of their parents, they do less well on a variety of indices," said psychologist Sanford Braver, lead author of the study, which was released Wednesday. "In other words, they suffer and they are more likely to have problems."

Researchers focused on 602

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### ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS ON MOVING

**Arizona State University researcher Sanford Braver** offers these thoughts to divorced parents who are considering a move:

"I would advise the parents to really think twice about it and not to blithely move because you want to move."

Is a better job out of town really that much better? Can a better job be found closer to home? What happens too often in divorce, Dr. Braver says, is parents confuse what's good for them with what's good for the child.

"Our evidence suggests that either parent's move will harm their child in the average case," he says.

But if, after sober consideration, a parent deems a move necessary, there are a number of things that can help, Dr. Braver says.

"Probably the most important is to do everything possible to facilitate the child's relationship with the parent who is miles away, which becomes much harder but not impossible," he says.

Often, however, the moving parent really hates the other parent — something the children will ultimately learn to resent. "It sort of boomerangs on the parent, so the parent who's doing the disparaging becomes a target of anger," Dr. Braver says.

He also advises that the child's vacation time be spent with the distant parent. "Then there's all the modern things that couldn't be done a couple of years ago: e-mail, burning CDs of each other, frequent telephone contact, Web cams."

**Dallas psychologist Richard Warshak** adds that if a move is necessary, it should be delayed as long as possible — at least until the child is in elementary school. A move involving very young children, he says, "sets up an obstacle to establishing and strengthening and maintaining a healthy bond." Most mental health professionals advise waiting until the child is at least 3.

*Karen Patterson*

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# For children of divorce, move by one parent can be harmful

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Arizona State students whose parents were divorced, comparing those whose parents stayed near the family home with those who had at least one parent who at some point moved more than an hour away, with or without the student. Sixty-one percent of the students moved or had a parent move such a distance.

In general, those with a geographically distant parent fared worse on 11 of 14 measures of well-being, the scientists report in the current *Journal of Family Psychology*.

On average, those with a distant parent received almost \$1,800 less per year in parental college support when they moved with their mother and almost \$1,000 less when their father moved away. These students also worried more about college expenses, particularly when it was their father who had moved, the research found.

Students with a distant parent also tended to be more hostile, more distressed by the divorce and have more difficulty adjusting. Measures such as hostility have been associated with health problems in later life, the study noted. The troubles with adjustment — as well as a generally lower satisfaction with life — traced mainly to the most infrequent situations, those where the child either stayed with or moved with the father, the scientists found.

California psychologist Judith Wallerstein, a critic of the study, suggested that this finding, in particular, needs more scrutiny. "The youngsters who had been in the custody of their fathers looked considerably more troubled, and that's very serious," she said.

## Broad approach

The new study is valuable for the breadth of the scientists' approach, noted Dr. Warshak, author of *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex*. "They relied on a wide range of outcome measures, so

they weren't just pinning their results to one outcome measure," he said.

Students with a distant parent also were more likely to give lower ratings of their health, of each parent's emotional support, of both parents as role models and of the quality of the parents' relationship with each other.

Overall self-assessments of health have been found to predict premature death.

While the results suggest that well-being and parental moves are related, the data don't show that the moves alone caused ill effects, experts noted.

"It could be that to a large extent the parents who are going to be positive role models and maintain a lifelong commitment to their children express that commitment by not moving away from their children," said Dr. Warshak, who specializes in divorce and custody issues.

Nevertheless, in ongoing research, Dr. Braver and colleagues have found preliminary support for the notion that the move itself, rather than family dysfunction, is behind some of the students' problems. For example, he said, the scientists have controlled their results to account for family violence and conflict, and for parents who are disengaged, yet those adjustments haven't explained the difference in well-being.

In the current study, students with and without a distant parent fared comparably in three measures of well-being: their assessment of choices regarding friendships and romantic relationships, and whether they abused alcohol or other substances.

Dr. Wallerstein, who has researched and written extensively about the impact of divorce on children, emphasized those measures as more important than the others in the study. "They're making a great deal out of less important differences," she said of the scientists.

## Case changed minds

Courts had been inclined to prevent a custodial parent from moving away — and make that parent prove it was in the child's best interest — until a 1996 California case known as Burgess, the study noted. In that case, the court held that the custodial parent should be able to move with the child unless the other parent can demonstrate that transferring custody is vital for the child's well-being.

The underlying assumption, Dr. Braver said, was that benefits to the custodial parent would help the child.

"Our study casts very great doubt on that assertion," Dr. Braver added, "because there's independent effects of the move on the child."

Dr. Wallerstein, whose views were considered instrumental in the Burgess decision, said the new study didn't shed much light on how the students were affected by a move.

"It's unfortunate that the researchers didn't have any personal data about what led those people to move in the first place," she said.

Factors that might prompt such a move, such as poverty or a remarriage, are also relevant to the children's well-being, she noted.

Dr. Braver agreed that individual circumstances are vital considerations for a court. But he stressed that in general, a parent's relocation is problematic for a child.

"Just like all parents," he said, "sometimes we make sacrifices for the sake of our children. And now there's some evidence that maybe that sacrifice is called for."

E-mail kpatterson@dallasnews.com