

Divorced Coparents' Use of Communication Technology

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INTRODUCTION

Spousal roles end after divorce, yet individuals' roles as parents continue. In divorced families, coparenting means that both parents will remain actively involved in the day-to-day lives of children following marital dissolution. Research shows that most children benefit from continued contact with parents following divorce (Bauserman, 2002). Consequently, coparents should work cooperatively to help children maintain relationships with both parents.

Communication technology includes any electronic device or application that allows for information to be exchanged between two or more parties. Modern-day examples include chat rooms, email, text messaging, social networking sites, Skype, and mobile phones. Given recent innovations in mobile phone technologies, their use is not restricted to telephone calls. Individuals may also use mobile phone features, such as text messaging or email, to communicate with others. This chapter will examine the current literature on postdivorce coparents' use of communication technologies and will provide directions for future research.

OVERVIEW

Widespread recent advancements in technology have increased researchers' interest about how,

in what contexts, and via what media individuals or groups utilize communication technologies to interact with others. In relationship science, researchers have focused almost exclusively on adolescents' use of communication technologies in dating relationships (e.g., Merkle & Richardson, 2000) and parents' use of communication technologies as a means of monitoring children (e.g., Shapiro, Bauer, Hamer, Kordy, Ward, & Bulik, 2008). Research on technology use in families has largely ignored family structure; consequently, we know little about the ways in which communication technology use varies across family types (e.g., nuclear families, postdivorce families, stepfamilies).

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN DIVORCED COPARENTS' USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Postdivorce families with children provide a salient context in which to study the use of communication technology. Each year one million children experience the divorce of their parents (Kreider, 2007). The courts increasingly award joint legal and physical custody following divorce, which means that coparents are expected to work together to make decisions about their children and sharing responsibilities for childrearing while residing in separate households (Ahrons, 2007; Miller,

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2009). Being able to work together is important for divorced coparents - coparental relationship quality is related to the well-being of children and parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008) and to the quality of parent-child relationships (Amato & Sobolweski, 2004), particularly for non-residential parents and children (Sobolewski & King, 2005).

Communication has been identified as a factor that may facilitate or hinder postdivorce familial relationships (e.g., Afifi & McManus, 2006). Following separation or divorce, parents must communicate about children's emotional and physical needs. In general, parents' communication patterns have been identified as predictors of coparenting success (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014). Hostile communication has been linked to reductions in parents' and children's adjustment and well-being (e.g., Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004), whereas cooperative communication has been shown to increase paternal involvement and enhance children's emotional and economic stability (e.g., Bodenmann et al., 2007). Given that communication has been identified as a primary indicator of coparents' cooperation (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014) and coparenting satisfaction (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004), understanding the ways in which coparents communicate with one another should be of central concern to researchers and practitioners.

Considerable research has explored coparental communication in postdivorce families and its implications for parents and children, yet little is known about how families utilize technology as a means for communication. Only a few studies to date have focused specifically on divorced coparents' use of communication technology (e.g., Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrod, 2003; Ganong, Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, & Markham, 2012; Yarosh, Chew, & Abowd, 2002). Given the novelty of communicative technologies in postdivorce families as a source of empirical study, it is difficult to identify leading scholars on this subject. Drs. Ganong and Coleman, post-divorce family scholars, and Dr. Braithwaite, a communication scholar whose research focuses on family com-

munication processes, have emerged as early key contributors to the literature. Results from their research indicate that communication technologies, specifically mobile phones, may be preferred methods of communication amongst divorced coparents and may provide benefits to coparents who must negotiate childrearing across multiple households. Yarosh, Chew, and Abowd have also contributed to this body of knowledge by studying the features of communication technologies and exploring the ways in which these features may facilitate or inhibit parent-child communication, particularly amongst non-residential parent-child pairs.

The following sections of this chapter will examine the use of technology in everyday life and the progression of empirical study from that of broad communication technology use in families in general to the ways in which more specific family types (e.g., postdivorce families, stepfamilies) utilize communicative technologies.

Use of Communication Technology in Everyday Life

The last generation has born witness to an unprecedented increase in the use of technology in everyday life. Hundreds of millions of personal computers were sold worldwide in the last decade alone and record numbers of individuals were connected to the Internet. In 2010, two or more computers were present in 58% of U.S. homes that included married couples with children. Eighty-nine percent of these households were reported to have two or more cell phones (Kennedy, Smith, Well, & Wellman, 2008), a trend consistent with claims that communication via mobile phones is the predominant method of communication in social networks (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009).

Families and Technology

In a time where individuals are increasingly mobile, technology has allowed geographically dispersed family members to remain in contact

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