

Supporting parent–child communication in divorced families

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Abstract

Divorce affects a significant number of children and parents worldwide. We interviewed 10 parents and five children to get a qualitative understanding of the challenges faced by these families and the role of technology in maintaining contact. We found that both parents had a strong need to maintain autonomy in raising the child, though the residential parent had more opportunities to be instrumentally involved. Both parents and children sought to manage tensions between the two households—parents by reducing interruption of the other household, children by trying to keep contact with the other parent as private as possible. Our participants used the telephone as the primary means to stay in touch while apart but expressed dissatisfaction with the limits of audio-only communication. It was difficult to keep a phone conversation engaging—both parents and children instead sought ways to maintain contact through shared activities and routines but found little technological support to do so while separated. Situated in these results, we present implications for design that may aid in creating technologies for communication between parents and young children in divorced families.

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1. Introduction and motivation

Millions of families worldwide are affected by divorce every year (Amato, 2001). In the United States, where this study was conducted, 32% of children live apart from one of their parents because of divorce or separation (Census, 2005). Though the legal definition of divorce, the culture regarding parental separation, and the custody customs vary significantly throughout the world, the consequences of a parent and child living apart seem to be similar despite the heterogeneity of circumstances. Children in divorced families score significantly lower on measures of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations than children in intact families (Amato, 2001). A meta-analysis of divorce literature from the 1980s and 1990s shows that despite the creation of social programs to support divorced families and the fact that divorce is increasingly common, children’s scores have

not improved (Amato, 2000). Having both parents participate in the upbringing of the child is related to positive outcomes such as academic success and emotional adjustment (Bauserman, 2002). However, typically, the non-residential parent’s involvement tends to be limited. Current visitation practices (i.e. short or infrequent visits supplemented by phone contact) make it difficult for the non-residential parent to contribute equally to raising a child (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1996). Furthermore, a large proportion of distributed parents (25%) are geographically separated from their children by a significant distance, making contact even more difficult (Flango, 2003). A variable that has not been studied is the degree to which the different communication technologies are supportive of the communication between parents and children in divorced families. In this work, we examine the challenges in communication between parents and young children in divorced families in order to inform the design of technologies to support them.

We begin by discussing related literature on supporting distributed families and parenting after divorce. We then give an overview of our method and demographics of the

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participants. We present the major themes that resulted from our interviews in clusters focusing on the unique characteristics of divorced families, the challenges parents and children face in maintaining communication, and current technology use. Finally, we discuss how the results of our interviews can inform the design of technologies for divorced families.

2. Related work

There are two broad bodies of work related to supporting parent–child interaction in divorced families. First, there are the previous HCI studies to support distributed families. Second, there is the body of work in psychology and sociology relating to the dynamics of divorced families. We give an overview of the literature in this section, but we return to some more specific findings further in this work.

2.1. Supporting distributed families

There has been a significant amount of interest in HCI in supporting distributed families. The ASTRA Project (Markopoulos et al., 2004) and Hermes@Home (Saslis-Lagoudakis et al., 2006) were two projects that used asynchronous messaging to support distributed interaction between family members at home and a family member who is away. While both of these focus on temporary separation, to support divorced families one would have to design technology for family members that permanently live apart.

The InterLiving Project (Hutchinson et al., 2003) explored communication between two households in a family, but focused on interaction between adult members (such as adult siblings, or an adult and an elderly parent). Similarly, Digital Family Portrait (Mynatt et al., 2001) explored how families may stay more aware of an elderly relative living in a different household. Both of these projects demonstrate that introducing technology into the home can connect two households. All of these projects make the assumption that members of both households are motivated to maintain contact; however, members of divorced families at times have conflicting motivations about inter-household communication. In this work, we focus specifically on the relationship between divorced parents and young children to inform the design of technologies for these families.

2.2. Parenting after divorce

Dalsgaard et al. (2006) explored parent–child interaction through a set of interviews and cultural probes. They discovered that parents and children establish intimacy through two types of interaction: care and play. Care interaction is directional, from parent to child, and includes activities such as setting rules, providing resources for learning, and assisting with everyday tasks and activities.

Play activities are equally important to parent–child intimacy and include collaborative everyday tasks, activities with shared artifacts, and physical play behaviors. Dalsgaard et al. (2006) explored the dynamics of intact families, while we are interested in seeing how these dynamics may be different in divorced or separated families.

Divorce has received a considerable amount of attention in psychology and sociology. These studies often focus on understanding the predictors and consequences of divorce. Amato (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of research on divorce in 1990s to find that while divorce usually has negative consequences, these can be moderated by the distributed parent staying instrumentally involved in the child's life and with the presence of proper social and emotional support. Furthermore, Seltzer and Bianchi (1988) showed that the quality and quantity of contact with the distributed parent decreased dramatically after the first year of separation. One of the reasons they cited for this loss of contact was geographic separation. Furstenberg and Nord (1985) studied patterns of parenting after separation to show that the distributed parent was likely to be involved *socially* in the child's life, but rarely set rules or assisted with care activities such as helping with homework. Sviggum (2000) provided a more phenomenological perspective on how Norwegian children perceive their parents' divorce. She showed that many children worried about losing contact with the distributed parent and some viewed themselves as a bridge between the two sides of a divorced family. This work is informed by these studies, but distinct from them in that it focuses exclusively on families in the United States and in that its explicit objective is to inform the design of technologies to support parent–child communication in divorced families.

3. Methods

We interviewed 15 children, residential parents, and non-residential parents from divorced families to gain a better understanding of the challenges they face and how they perceive their relationships with others in the family. We selected the semi-structured interview as a methodology, because we were interested in getting a phenomenological understanding of the experiences of the participants and the meaning that they make out of these experiences. In the next subsections, we present our participant demographics, discuss our procedure, and give an account of our analysis.

3.1. Participants

We interviewed 10 parents and five children (ages 7–14) about their experiences. We recruited divorced families through word-of-mouth and postings in the volunteer section of a popular local online classifieds site (craigslist.org). Our call requested participation of divorced families where the child had contact with the distributed parent at least once in the last month, but we did not mention a specific

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