

For Review Only

Divorce in a family is a traumatic event. It affects everyone—the divorcing couple, their in-laws and invariably, their children. In some cases, the children are caught between both parents and their tussles over custody rights.

To develop emotionally and mentally, children need both parents. So, what are the implications of divorce on children? How do they express their distress? What are the common behavioural problems that children display?

Parents contemplating or going through a divorce also need guidance. *Living with Divorce and Family Issues* discusses frankly the issues that come with divorce such as dating, re-marrying and step-families.

Revised and updated, *Living with Divorce and Family Issues* is part of a series of handbooks on mental health in children written by mental health professionals from the Child Guidance Clinic. Other titles in the series are:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
 - Anger
 - Autism
- Discipline Issues
 - Grief
- Intelligence and Learning Difficulties
 - Self-harm Behaviours
 - Sexuality Issues
 - Stress

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

 Marshall Cavendish
Editions



DR PARVATHY PATHY, DR ANN-MARIE LO CASTRO, FOO CIRONG

Living with DIVORCE AND FAMILY ISSUES

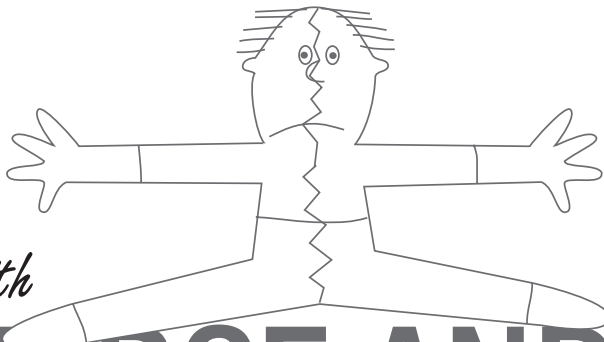
Marshall Cavendish Editions

DR PARVATHY PATHY,
DR ANN-MARIE LO CASTRO, FOO CIRONG



Living with
**DIVORCE AND
FAMILY ISSUES**

For Review Only



Living with
**DIVORCE AND
FAMILY ISSUES**

DR PARVATHY PATHY,
DR ANN-MARIE LO CASTRO, FOO CIRONG

For Review Only

© 2015 Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited

Illustrations by Julie Davey
Series Designer: Bernard Go

First published 2003 by Times Editions

This 2015 edition published by
Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300, fax: (65) 6285 4871. E-mail: genrefsales@sg.marshallcavendish.com. Website: www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices

Marshall Cavendish Corporation. 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a trademark of Times Publishing Limited.

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Pathy, Parvathy, author.

Living with divorce and family issues / Dr Parvathy Pathy, Dr Ann-Marie Lo Castro, Foo Cirong ; illustrations by Julie Davey. – Second edition. – Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015.

pages cm – (Living with)

“First published 2003 by Times Editions.”

ISBN : 978-981-4634-19-9 (paperback)

1. Children of divorced parents – Psychology. 2. Children of divorced parents – Family relationships. 3. Divorce – Psychological aspects. I. Title. II. Lo Castro, Ann-Marie, author. III. Foo, Cirong, author. IV. Davey, Julie, illustrator. V. Series: Living with.

HQ777.5

306.89 -- dc23

OCN914995293

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

**Dedicated to
all the children of the
Child Guidance Clinic and their parents**

For Review Only

CONTENTS

PREFACE	6	PART 8	
		Remarriage And Step-families	67
INTRODUCTION	7	PART 9	
		How Teachers Can Help	72
PART 1		PART 10	
What Does Divorce Mean To A Child?	8	Where Can I Go For Support?	74
PART 2		USEFUL RESOURCES	78
Helping Children Cope With Divorce	18	ABOUT THE AUTHORS	79
PART 3			
Behavioural Issues After Divorce	26		
PART 4			
Is Divorce The Best Option?	32		
PART 5			
Breaking The News To Children	37		
PART 6			
Custody And Access Issues	44		
PART 7			
Dating After Divorce	62		

For Review Only

PREFACE

Divorce rates all over the world are rising in tandem with changing lifestyles and expectations that come with modernisation. However, divorce is still a traumatic event for all parties concerned – the couple that is no longer able to live together, their children, the in-laws, and the friends and acquaintances. All parties are invariably affected to some degree by news of a divorce. Often, it is the children who are the worst hit. Unlike adults who can turn to friends, counsellors or relatives for support and advice, children are often left in the lurch; they have no one to turn to for help and support, and no one seems to understand their distress.

This should not be the case. Adults, especially parents, have a responsibility to help their children cope with the impact of divorce. This is not an easy task, as the parent, especially the one who is being divorced, is also hurting and has to cope with caring for the children, new routines and lifestyle, and added responsibilities as a single parent. It is worse when the parent has to shoulder the financial burden alone and also has to go out to work at the same time. Nevertheless, it is still possible for parents facing a marital and family break-up to help their children cope with their divorce.

This book aims to help divorced parents understand how divorce affects children and how they can help their children cope with the potential negative impacts of divorce. Other adults, such as aunts, uncles or grandparents, can also use this book to help children under their care who are hurting from their parents' divorce. This book serves to answer common questions and issues that arise as divorced parents learn to reorganise their lives and move on to a new life phase, either alone or with a new family or partner.

Dr Parvathy Pathy

July 2015

INTRODUCTION

Divorce in any family constitutes a big transition and major adjustment for children. Children may experience and display several emotional and behavioural reactions to the divorce and the 'loss' of one parent. This book hopes to help parents understand the psychosocial and emotional impacts of their divorce on their children so that they can help to minimise their children's pain and distress over the family break-up.

The way children react to their parents' divorce is strongly influenced by the way in which their parents behave before, during and after the separation or divorce. Children will need greater support, sensitivity and love to help them overcome the loss that they experience during this difficult time. Like their parents who experience grief from the divorce, children have similar feelings of sadness, anger, denial, fear and guilt. Such children may develop adjustment difficulties in the form of emotional and behavioural problems, difficulties with studies or social withdrawal.

Children whose parents are divorced often feel different from their peers. They have burning questions about what has happened and about their future:

- Why can't my parents stay together anymore?
- When will the divorce be over?
- Will they still be my parents?
- What is going to happen to me?
- Will my parents abandon me, like they have left the marriage ?

This book attempts to create a greater awareness and understanding of the world of children whose parents have divorced or are in the midst of it. Some specific case studies are used to illustrate the difficulties that parents commonly experience and effective ways to deal with them.

This book also highlights issues related to the spectrum of emotional distancing or emotional absence in intact families or families going through the process of divorce.

It is our hope that this book will help parents, who are undergoing the process of divorce, minimise its impact on their children who are also going through a difficult, bewildering and painful period.

For Review Only

WHAT DOES DIVORCE MEAN TO A CHILD?

PART

1

There are some children who never outgrow the impact of their parents' divorce. Feelings of hurt, anger, abandonment and of being unloved may continue to linger in their hearts even after they become adults. Therefore, it is important for parents to continue to care for and love their children even after their marriage is over.

A child may often experience several common emotions during and after his parents' separation or divorce. To help the child cope with the loss, it is crucial that his parents help him acknowledge and resolve these different feelings.

1.1 HOW MAY CHILDREN REACT NEGATIVELY TO A DIVORCE?

Some children may suffer detrimental effects to their self-esteem to the extent that they view themselves as 'bad' children who have caused their parents to divorce. This is especially the case with younger children who tend to be egocentric and think that the world revolves around them.

From a child's perspective, the events that occur around him are caused by his behaviour, thoughts and wishes. Thus, the child may blame himself for his parents' divorce and conclude that he does not deserve the good things in life. The child may even perceive himself as being unfortunate and deprived, in having to adjust to the various changes in his family and in his life.

Some children idolise their parents. When things go wrong between his parents, the child may not be able to accept that his 'perfect' parents are at fault. He will find it easier to blame himself than think negatively of his parents. Thus, the child gets saddled with needless guilt and develops a negative self-image.

Through an unconscious mechanism, children may also overachieve to get their parents' attention and save their marriage. Children may also have an urgent need to feel loved and accepted by others. Such unrealistic demands and expectations may continue into adulthood and have a negative impact on the child's future relationships.

1.2 WHAT ARE SOME COMMON REACTIONS TO DIVORCE?

Denial

Denial is one method a child may use to cope with his emotional pain and protect himself from feelings of betrayal, anger and sadness. When a child hears about his parents' divorce, his first reaction may be disbelief, especially if the news had come without warning. A child in denial may choose to ignore the news or cling

For Review Only

to the belief that his parents' separation and problems are only temporary. He may refuse to talk about the situation and instead make up wonderful stories about his family.

The child's prolonged denial of his parents' or family situation may be an indication of self-blame. If a child believes that he is the reason for his parents' divorce, he may become overly obliging in the hope that his parents will reunite. The child may harbour reunification fantasies about his parents. He may even try to play peacemaker to help them reconcile.

It is important to note that while denial may help to shield a child against his initial shock, persistent denial will compromise his ability to cope with the divorce and move on in his life. It will also affect the child's ability to successfully negotiate and overcome the various developmental stages and different challenges in his life.

Sadness, hurt and loss

Sadness is the most pervasive reaction in children when their parents break up. A child will get very upset when his parents do not get along well, especially if they are constantly physically or verbally abusing each other. A child will usually feel sad about his parents' break-up, even if there had been constant fights and arguments at home.

For a child, a parent's place in his life is usually irreplaceable. When one parent leaves, the child may think that the parent no longer cares about him. This leaves him feeling rejected and unloved. The child's sadness about the family break-up may be expressed through crying or a glum and sad demeanour. The child may become reserved and lethargic or daydream often.

Some parents think that leaving the marital home in a secret but sudden manner will shield the child from the negative impact of the separation and stop the child from asking them difficult and awkward questions. However, the parent's sudden departure from the family, without adequate preparation or a proper farewell, only serves to heighten the child's feelings of loss, insecurity and unpredictability in his life. Such feelings are detrimental to the child's sense of security, emotional well-being and development.

The emotional hurt that a child feels is usually amplified when the parent who leaves the home does not keep in regular contact with him. In cases where a child is abandoned by a parent, he may feel rejected, unworthy and suffer from a low self-esteem.

Worry

Children may suffer from worry as a result of the helplessness and insecurity brought on by their parents' break-up. The child's worries and fears are accentuated if the remaining parent is distressed, depressed or suicidal and appears incapable of looking after the children or handling the home situation.

Issues that may worry the children include :

- What will happen after one parent leaves the home?
- Will their various needs still be met?
- Will the remaining parent also abandon them?
- Will they have to move home and change school?
- Will they still get to see the parent who has left?

The child may demonstrate this worry by excessive crying or clinging to a parent, or having a need to hang on to a beloved object that he had already outgrown, such as a stuffed toy. He may have nightmares, poor sleep, poor appetite or lose interest in playing or studying.

Anger

Children who feel abandoned and unloved may experience intense feelings of anger. Such children may get angry for a variety of reasons. However, due to their young age and immaturity, these children will not be able to understand or label the various emotions that they may be feeling. Even several years after their parent's divorce, some of these angry children remain upset and angry about the family break-up. This anger may be directed at one or both parents and lead to problems for themselves.

Children may even blame the parent who had filed for divorce or walked out on the family. A child may blame his parents for causing him misery because of the many difficult changes that came with the divorce. He may angrily view his parents as being selfish or incapable of protecting him from his pain. He may even start wondering why his parents got married in the first place. The child's anger may be expressed as irritation towards his parents or quarrelsome, aggressive and disobedient behaviour towards other adults or children in his life. The child may reject the parent with whom he is angry with, and refuse to have any contact or interaction with that parent. Sometimes, the child may even lash out in anger at the parent he is living with.

For Review Only

In school, a child's anger may be expressed through aggressive acts such as throwing objects, stealing, vandalism or fighting with peers. Some children act up by refusing to do their homework. Some of the child's actions end up being so disruptive that he ends up facing disciplinary action at school. These behavioural problems are just some manifestations of how angry and unhappy the child is feeling about his parents' divorce.

These problems indicate that the child is unable to accept and resolve his feelings about his parents' divorce and the new family situation. His parents need to help him express his anger in a more appropriate and safe manner. Even though the child's parents should understand that their child's aggressive and difficult behaviour is the result of his emotional disturbance, they should still set limits on their child's destructive behaviour. In addition, the parents should help the child talk about his various feelings about the divorce. Children need time to resolve their anger. It is essential for parents to demonstrate their continuous support and care at this time, even though the family break-up is equally difficult for them.

Guilt

A child normally allocates a reason to an event. He may naively believe that his parents are divorcing because of him, especially when his parents do not speak to him and explain the reason for their break-up. Young children, for instance, may believe that their actions, such as being disobedient, not completing homework or talking back to a parent, may have driven away their parent. Even though older children may know that the divorce is not their fault, they may still feel guilty for not being 'better' children.

In very chaotic families, where parents are constantly quarrelling or fighting, a child may sometimes feel that it would be better if his parents did not stay together. When the parents eventually separate and divorce, the fighting and constant turmoil in the home ends and the child finally experiences some measure of peace and relief. However, the child may still feel conflicted and guilty for harbouring such ambivalent feelings and wishes about his parents. He may still hope that his parents could be happily together.

1.3 WHAT ARE SOME CHANGES CHILDREN FACE AFTER A DIVORCE?

For most families, divorce means re-adapting to life and having to make several significant changes. The children usually have to face practical changes that

may require major adjustments, such as switching to a new school, moving to a new and smaller house, assuming more household responsibilities, adjusting to new childcare arrangements and perhaps staying with step-parents. The lifestyle changes may be gradual or they may occur at a time when the children are emotionally grappling with various feelings associated with the loss of a parent or their former lifestyle. These important changes add to the stress that the family is already feeling, and may disrupt the routine that the children have been accustomed to. Children with poor coping skills and low adaptive abilities are most likely to feel overwhelmed and stressed by the onslaught of so many accompanying changes.

A new home

Children may have to move to a new home after their parents' divorce. Usually, the new home is less ideal compared to the familiar home they are used to. Some families may purchase smaller flats to stay in, while others are forced to stay with relatives or friends until they can afford to move out. These changes can be hard on children, especially if they live with friends or relatives and have to cope with new house rules and routines.

Infants may experience disruptions in their sleep and eating patterns, and preschoolers may cry excessively or become clingy and fussy. Older children may resent not having enough privacy and having to depend on someone else's family.

A new school

Some children may have to be enrolled in a new school if their current school is too far away from their new home. This means that they may face some difficulty in maintaining the friendships they had formed in the current school.

Attending a new school also means that the child has to adjust to a different environment. He has to get used to new teachers and teaching styles, adapt to new rules and find new friends. All these can be quite threatening as the child tries to find a niche for himself. All these changes can add on to the stress that the child is already facing from his parents' divorce. For children who are not sociable or outgoing, making new friends is often a difficult and formidable task. The resultant social anxiety may aggravate their emotional distress and insecurity, causing them to dread school. Younger children may become clingier and revert to regressive behaviour, such as soiling themselves or bed-wetting.

For Review Only

More/new responsibilities

Some children have to cope with housework and taking care of younger siblings, if the custodial parent has to work to support the family.

Older children, in particular, may be tasked with household chores such as doing the laundry, cleaning the house and preparing the meals. They may also have to ensure that their younger siblings complete their homework, take their meals and wash up. Some children also take it upon themselves to either physically or emotionally care for their parent, who may be emotionally devastated by the divorce. Some of these children do not allow themselves to grieve, as they have to focus all their energies on their emotionally distraught parent. This robs them the chance to mix with their or peers and engage in age-appropriate leisure or academic pursuits.

New caregiver

When custodial parents have to work to support the family, they have to make new childcare arrangements for young children. This may include getting relatives to look after the children, hiring a nanny, putting the child in a childcare centre or student care centre.

Unfortunately, most young children initially experience significant difficulty in adapting to the change in routine. Besides having to adjust to a new environment and a new caregiver, children have to deal with having less time and attention from their parents. A child, especially a young child, may experience significant emotional disturbance when he is being separated from his custodial parent. The child may worry that his remaining parent may abandon him and display his anxiety through excessive crying, temper tantrums, clinginess or regressive behaviour.

1.4 TO WHAT EXTENT ARE CHILDREN AFFECTED BY THEIR PARENTS' DIVORCE?

The impacts of divorce on a child depend on several factors, namely:

- his age and personality or temperamental traits,
- the type of relationship he has with his parents and other supportive adults,
- the manner in which the divorce is explained to him,
- the number and type of lifestyle changes he has to make after the family break-up,

- the way his parents relate with one another and communicate regarding child custody or access issues.

1.5 WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABSENCE AND ITS EFFECT ON CHILDREN?

A child whose parent is physically present, but disengaged, distracted or emotionally distant, may display similar emotional or behavioural difficulties and issues as the child whose parents are divorced.

A child who feels ignored or unloved by his parents may have feelings of rejection, poor self-worth and sadness as the child's need for closeness, emotional warmth and attachment remains unmet. A child whose emotional needs are unmet may become needy, fretful, irritable or angry. A parent who is emotionally absent may cause a child to feel confused. A child may not understand why he is being ignored. He will feel worthless, depressed or become withdrawn.

'Ghost parents' refers to parents who are emotionally neglectful or who are uninvolved in their children's day-to-day life. These parents are often absorbed in their own world or may be feeling rejected as a result of their failed marriage. Consequently, they are unable to focus on their child's emotional needs.

There is often no emotional engagement with the child and the child is left to resolve his own emotional needs and issues. The child may then experience frustration, anger, loneliness and a longing for emotional attachment and attention from his parent.

Depending on their age, emotional development and cognitive abilities, the child may feel bad or unlovable. Meanwhile, the parent who is emotionally absent remains unaware of the events happening in his child's life and the child's feelings and needs. In order to compensate, the child may unconsciously attempt to attract attention and win his parents' love by externalising his sense of self-worth (e.g. placing too much emphasis on achievements and gift-giving rather than building his inner self-esteem) or engage in difficult, regressive or negative behaviours. The child may steal to 'comfort' himself or to unconsciously get his parents' attention. He may neglect his homework or start to fight with his classmates.

When a parent is emotionally absent, the child may become parentified and assume duties and responsibilities beyond his years in order to make up for the feelings of abandonment he is experiencing. The parentified child or adolescent may be expected to take care of younger siblings by helping with the feeding, bathing and housework. Furthermore, the parentified child may need to be a

For Review Only

source of emotional support to the remaining parent, as the parent may be too upset to care for himself or herself. This parentification of the child and the associated inappropriate role-reversal may be detrimental to the child's emotional well-being and development.

For a child, having an absent parent may also lead to a lack of opportunities to socialise with peers and participate in usual activities that help to develop his sense of self-competence and self-identity. A healthy and secure attachment during the child's early years helps the child to:

- develop intellectually,
- attain perceptual awareness,
- develop resilience and coping abilities to manage stress and fear appropriately,
- develop healthy peer and adult relationships,
- attain appropriate levels of self-confidence, self-worth and contentment.

Every child is different. Different children react in different ways to the same challenges in their life. However, it is still helpful for parents to understand the typical feelings and behaviour that are prominent across different age groups. It is also essential for parents to try to maintain the child's routine and to adequately prepare the child for any changes, so as to reduce further stress for the child.

Age-specific reactions to parental divorce or separation

Infants and toddlers may:

- show irritable behaviour such as crying and being fussy,
- show changes in sleep patterns and other daily routines,
- feel fear and anxiety towards new adults in the family,
- have difficulty in being away from parents,
- have nightmares,
- display anger, often as tantrums,
- become clingy towards caregivers.

Preschoolers may:

- worry about their safety or whether they are loved,
- become clingy and refuse to be separated from their caregivers,

- deny that the divorce is real,
- believe that they are the cause of the divorce,
- be overly obliging,
- show regressive behaviour, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting and being overly clingy,
- hit peers or younger siblings,
- have nightmares.

Children in primary school may:

- feel different from their peers and stigmatised,
- blame every disappointment on the divorce,
- assume blame, so as to feel more in control,
- withdraw from company or become aggressive,
- harbour fantasies about their parents reuniting,
- be sensitive and more attuned to how their parents are feeling,
- be overly obliging,
- do poorly in school,
- lack concentration,
- take sides with either parent, rejecting one parent in the process.

Pre-teens and adolescents may:

- have difficulty accepting the reality of changes caused by the divorce,
- feel abandoned by the parent who leaves,
- feel angry with the parent who initiated the divorce, even if there had been marital violence or infidelity by the other parent,
- withdraw from long-time friends and favourite activities,
- become more aggressive and rebellious towards teachers and parents,
- lose interest in studies,
- engage in unacceptable activities, such as stealing and truancy,
- feel angry and unsure of their beliefs about love, marriage and family,
- experience a sense of having grown up too soon,
- worry about 'adult matters' such as the family's financial security,
- feel obligated to take on more adult responsibilities in the family,
- feel different from their peers and stigmatised.

For Review Only

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Parvathy Pathy

Dr Parvathy Pathy is a child psychiatrist attached to the Child Guidance Clinic, Institute of Mental Health, Singapore. She received her basic and advanced medical degrees from the National University of Singapore and her postgraduate training in the area of child abuse and juvenile sex offending at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia and the Young Abusers Project, London.

Dr Pathy counsels children, teenagers and their families who come to her with a wide range of emotional, psychological and behavioural problems. These include children who are struggling with their parents' divorce. Dr Parvathy Pathy also looks after abused children and conducts custody and access assessments for the Family Justice Courts, Singapore.

Dr Pathy has written two other books:

- *Kim's Story* (2002) – a short story about unconditional love and adoption
- *Living With Discipline Issues* (2015) – a book about effective discipline techniques for parents.

Dr Ann-Marie Lo Castro

Dr Ann-Marie Lo Castro has been a Principal Clinical Psychologist, Clinical Supervisor and Therapeutic Play Specialist at the Child Guidance Clinic since 2008. She holds a Master's Degree (cum laude) in Clinical Psychology Research; an MBA (cum laude) with research in Stress and Managed Health Care and in Social Science (clinical practice). Her PhD in Behavioural Medicine focuses on psychological variables in relation to breast cancer in women. She is also an Executive Business and Life Coach. She is passionate about people embracing change and reaching their maximum potential.

Dr Lo Castro is currently dedicated to therapeutic practice and intervention, to support children, with a range of psychological, behavioural and emotional issues. She also specialises in divorce and custody issues, complex trauma, and creative and expressive arts in therapy, to help children express their innermost feelings and thoughts. Motivated to explore answers to human behaviour, Dr Lo Castro follows scientific developments through NASA and has proposed a

model for psychology and outer space to help with human resilience and coping behaviours. She attributes her achievements to the generous support of a loving family, her two beautiful children Marcello and Raffaella and the aesthetic value she attaches to life and the people around her.

Ms Foo Cirong

Ms Foo Cirong is a Medical Social Worker with the Child Guidance Clinic. As part of the youth forensic team, she provides support to parents or caregivers whose children may be struggling with abuse-related traumas or offending behaviours.

Ms Foo believes that positive relationships within families or communities are critical in supporting the young persons in navigating their personal difficulties. In her work with families, she focuses on helping them to better understand their children's needs and difficulties. She also supports parents in exploring more effective communication and parenting strategies with their children. Approaching families from the strengths perspective allows her to leverage and build on the resources within these families.