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When the kids get the house

The parents do the shuffling in a 'bird's nest' divorce

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Almost 20 years later, they have fallen out of love with each other, but the home remains the center of their post-divorce family life, just as the two children they share stayed rooted there. Annie and Al alternate their time in a townhouse three miles away in Ayer while their daughter, Kylie, 16, stays grounded in the "big house," as did their son, Nick, 19, until he left for college in the fall. They'll sit down for Christmas dinner together, as they did this year for Thanksgiving.

"While this arrangement is not for everyone, it certainly works well for us," Annie said last week, sitting next to Kylie and across the kitchen counter from Al. "I'm really proud of the fact that this has worked as well as it has for us. I think that it speaks a lot to what our focus has always been, which is the children, and will always be."

The Garcias separated in 2002 and their divorce, which they arrived at through mediation, became final in January 2005. Annie, a flight attendant, and Al, director of sales for a startup software company, trade time between the condo and the family home.

"Throughout our whole marriage we always felt we were child-centered and therefore, it became an easy conclusion that the children are what's important



Sixteen-year-old Kylie Garcia sits on the indoor swing in the Harvard home in which she and her brother, Nicholas, and their dogs Margaret and Austin, grew up. Kylie is flanked by her divorced parents Al and Annie, who alternate between living in the home and living in a nearby townhouse.
(ELLEN HARASIMOWICZ)

After the divorce: 5 relationship styles

"Perfect Pals" are good friends, even though they are divorced, talking often and sometimes getting together without the children.

"Cooperative Colleagues" consult with each other about their children, but don't have a personal relationship beyond that. They share parenting, occasionally spending time together, such as holidays, birthdays or other celebrations.

"Angry Associates" argue and feel angry most of the time when they are talking about their children and making decisions regarding them.

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here," Al said. "The fact we can't get along shouldn't impact them. So we decided, let's not make their life crazy, let's let them have consistency, let them have familiarity. Let them stay and we be the ones to move."

The Garcias have become a two-house family, but remain connected through their children. In the decades since joint custody has become more common, it's more typical for the children to shuffle between two homes, whether they are three miles or three time zones away. Many will gain stepparents or half-siblings in one or both homes along the way. Extended families may be redefined. Divorce may mean not only new houses, but new schools, new friends, new financial realities.

All these changes affect children in different ways at different times. Family therapists try to encourage divorcing parents to help children adjust to the changes in their family by communicating, compromising and cooperating.

"Parents can acknowledge, 'This wasn't working as a marital arrangement, but we have to figure out how to make it work at the marriage's end because we have children,'" said Zelda J. Schwartz, who for 11 years has led court-mandated seminars for divorcing couples at the Jewish Family Service, in addition to seeing families and individuals. "It's all about the kids."

How parents work with each other is a critical factor, Constance R. Ahrons, former director of the marriage and family therapy doctoral training program at the University of Southern California, notes in her book, "We're Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say About Their Parents' Divorce."

"The key to helping children make their way into adulthood with a sense of family intact is the quality of the parental relationship after divorce," she wrote. "With parents who can communicate and negotiate and accommodate, children have the best opportunity to thrive."

Dr. Ahrons based this conclusion on results of her Bi-nuclear Family Study, which she described last month in Worcester at the annual Jacobson Memorial Program, sponsored by Jewish Family Service. The long-term study followed the lives of divorced

families in Wisconsin for more than 20 years, beginning with interviews of 98 randomly selected pairs of ex-spouses with young children in 1979. Follow-ups were conducted one, three and five years after divorce. New partners were also interviewed twice in those five years.

Then in 1999 and 2000, 173 out of 204 of the ex-spouses' children, now adults, were contacted and interviewed to gain their insights.

"Divorce is painful for all children," Dr. Ahrons said. But divorce doesn't have to destroy families.

Up to 1 million children's parents divorce each year. Roughly one-fifth of them - 200,000 children - will have trouble in adulthood. Dr. Ahrons asks whether it relates to problems during the marriage or after the divorce. Teasing out the effects of divorce is difficult because conditions before the breakup usually aren't known, Dr. Ahrons said. "Good divorces," or those that proceed without conflict, are invisible, rarely making headlines, she said.

The risk of long-term problems can be affected by a variety of factors, the study showed. Some pre-date the divorce, such as relationships between the parents, between each parent and child, and between siblings. Substance and physical abuse clearly played a crucial role. The parent's emotional well-being was also significant. After the divorce, stressful changes such as new homes or school or family members took a toll, the study found. On the plus side, grandparents and other relatives or teachers and coaches provided important support. And a child's temperament was a key to resilience.

How their parents dealt with one another once they were divorced made a difference to the adults in Dr. Ahrons' study. She coined five phrases to describe these relationships, which can alter over time.

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"Fiery Foes" rarely talk to each other, avoiding contact and clashing when they do see each other. A third party usually resolves disagreements. "Dissolved Duos" have no contact. One parent usually disappears from the children's lives. In Dr. Ahrons' study, most of the children felt their parents were free of conflict 20 years after divorce, allowing them to share special times as a family.

For the Garcia children, only three years have passed, but both Kylie, a junior at the Bromfield School, and Nick, a freshman at Connecticut College, agree that while their parents could no longer get along while married, they have crafted a workable arrangement now.

"I was old enough by the time my parents divorced to realize that they should not have been married anymore," Nick said in a phone interview last week.

"It's best when they aren't together for long periods of time," Kylie said, sitting between her parents.

When Nick graduated from high school, Annie and Al celebrated the occasion by inviting his friends and their parents to a brunch a week before. Some of the guests were confused when they saw Annie and Al both there.

"It does take some explaining in situations like that," Nick said. "One of my pet peeves is when people tell me the situation is 'weird.' I say, 'Can you do better?' 'Weird' seems not quite descriptive enough. It's unusual."

Theirs is a small extended family, consisting of Annie's parents in Wisconsin and Al's cousin in Texas and godparents in Massachusetts, which Nick thinks may be why the four of them spend holidays together.

Kylie thinks her father's relationship with his in-laws before the divorce dictates how they get along now.

"My grandparents still give Dad presents. They talk to him when they call me or are looking for Mom," she said. Annie went to both sides of the family to explain how they were arranging family life post-divorce. Al

is still the father of your grandchildren, she told her parents. I'm not going anywhere, she said to Al's side of the family.

For Christmas, Nick and Kylie will be with their father on Christmas Eve and spend Christmas morning with their mother, Nick said. The parents switch, but come together again in the afternoon. Nick plans to travel for the rest of his vacation. "Divorce or no divorce, I don't want to spend a month in Harvard," he said.

Once Kylie is in college, the plan is to sell the "big house." Annie and Al both want to move south, and joke about how they may end up within an hour of where Kylie chooses to enroll.

They laughed when the idea of a duplex came up. Their arrangement works in part because it is limited to their kids' teen years, Annie said. While both parents have dated, they are reluctant to bring new people into their children's lives.

"We're momma and poppa bear here. You protect who gets near these kids," she said. "I'm all for dating and having friends and enjoying your life in the adult world, but as far as someone knocking at your door, I don't want anyone near either one of them unless it's a very important relationship to me."

No matter where the two parents end up, they still see spending some holidays together.

"I want (Al) to move on and be healthy, and I do too, but part of that health means we continue to meet for the holidays," Annie said.

Kylie said some of her friends who shuttle between their divorced parents' homes envy her situation. "Everyone admires it," she said.

But it's not perfect, Annie insists. "We're not glorifying divorce."

"Absolutely," Al agreed. Nick may be less involved in the daily life of his family as his independence grows, but he shares his parents' concern for everyone's happiness.

"This is definitely not the easy way for them to go about the divorce," Nick said. "I appreciate it a lot."