THE FAMILY THERAPY

NETWORKER

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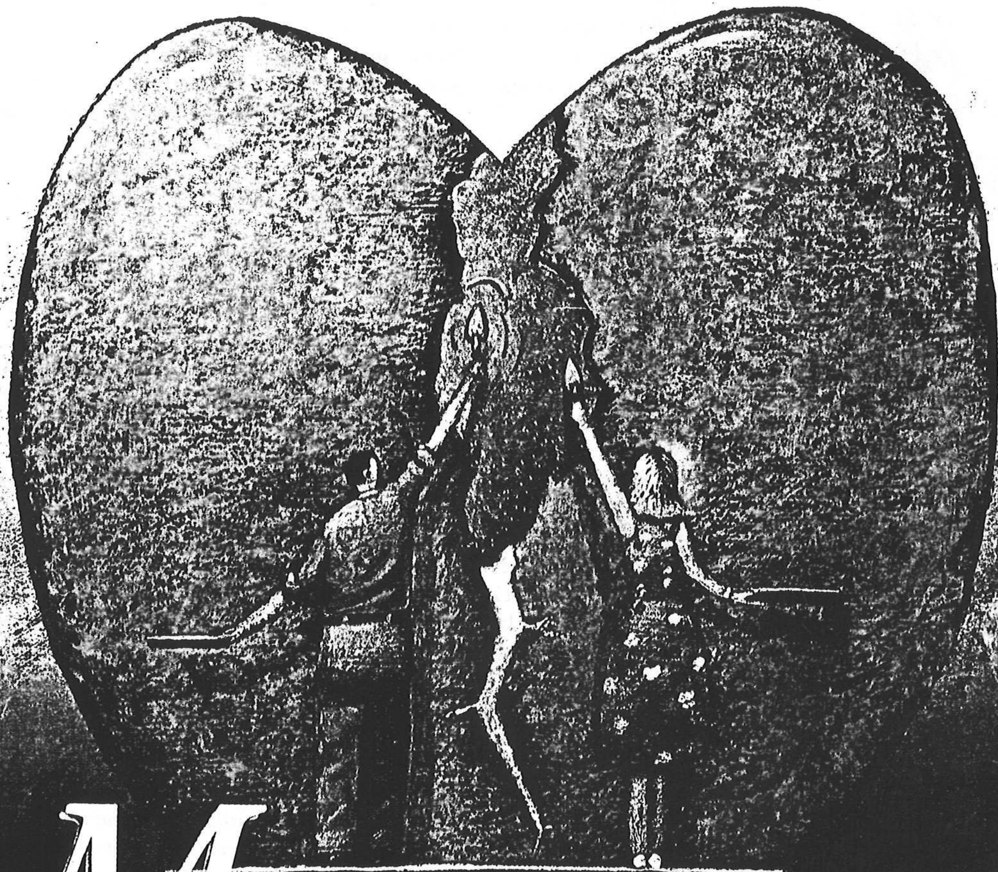
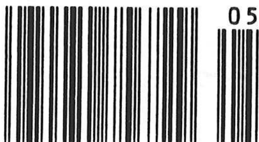


MENDING MARRIAGES

What's Really Best for the Children?



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FROM THE EDITOR

WHEN WE INVITED ELIE WIESEL TO ADDRESS THIS YEAR'S FAMILY Therapy Network Symposium on "Morality and Psychotherapy," none of us had the slightest idea what he thought of health care reform, managed care or, for that matter, psychotherapy. What would a Nobel Peace Prize winner and one of the world's leading spokespeople for human rights have to say to family therapists?

Wiesel talked about the family as a protective shield "in a world of strangers," and how the very idea of family is inseparable from the moral imperative to prepare the way for future generations. "Once we enter the family, we are here only as messengers, just as those who preceded us were messengers," he said. For thousands of years, Wiesel told us, the family had served as the messenger for Biblical traditions that preserved the legacy of Jewish culture. "Had the family broken down, I think our people would have disappeared," he said. Religious tradition still shaped family life in the small Hungarian town where Wiesel grew up. "In my town, we had rabbis naturally," he said, " . . . but not a single therapist.

Today, as Wiesel well knows, the therapeutic culture probably has far more influence than religion on the way people face the emotional upheavals that can overwhelm families. Yet, while therapists have taken on the socially sanctioned mission of guiding people through life's trials, we have shunned the moral authority that traditionally gave religious advisors much of their credibility, power and wisdom. Instead, we pride ourselves on being neutral and "value-free."

In recent years, however, amidst the rising tide of social violence, personal alienation and family disintegration, therapists have been doing some soul-searching about their role with troubled couples and their families. Five years ago, we devoted an issue to Judith Wallerstein's controversial *Second Chances*, a report of a 15-year longitudinal study of the impact of divorce that gained national publicity by raising disturbing questions about the emotional toll divorce had taken on a generation of children. Since then, the work of Wallerstein and other divorce researchers has become ammunition in the roiling political debate about "family values." Increasingly, the gap between the supposedly hermetic and value-free world of therapy and the hurly-burly of politics and social conflict seems to be narrowing.

In this *Networker*, we examine what happens when, in writer Kathryn Robinson's words, the "political rhetoric and finger pointing" end and "abstractions about marriage and divorce become flesh" in the therapist's consulting room. In her cover story, Robinson examines the mental-health community's debate about divorce and highlights the work of an outspoken group of therapists who make no pretense of neutrality when couples are considering splitting up. Elsewhere, researcher John Gottman offers some intriguing findings that could place empirical evidence in an unaccustomed position of prominence in a debate about clinical practice. And, Melinda Blau uses her experience as a family therapy client to give the consumer's perspective on what can go both right and terribly wrong when a couple considering divorce steps into a therapist's office.

Clearly, no research study or proclamation of therapeutic principles can offer contemporary families the guidance that religious traditions once provided for generations and generations of families. But the more we recognize the implicit power of the therapy relationship, the more we have had to acknowledge that we are influential messengers to today's families and, as Elie Wiesel warned his Symposium audience, messengers are not always aware of the meaning of their message. Whether or not we wish to consider ourselves moral authorities, we occupy a position the rabbis in Wiesel's hometown would well understand.

WE WERE HONORED TO HAVE BEEN NAMED FINALISTS FOR TWO NATIONAL Magazine Awards this year, one for General Excellence for publications with circulation under 100,000, and the other for Best Single-Topic Issue for our July/August 1993 edition, "The Black Middle Class: Challenging the Limits of the American Dream." In addition, we again received two nominations for *The Utne Reader's* Alternative Press Awards, for Feature Writing and General Excellence, both of which we won last year.

Richard Simon
Editor

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The Divorce Debate

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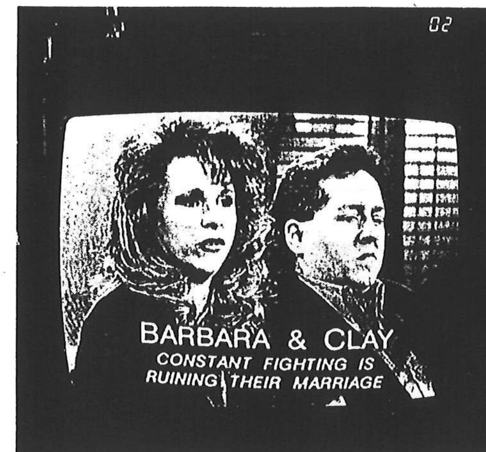

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THE DIVORCE DEBATE

GETTING THROUGH THE FIRE

Negotiating the hurdles of coparenting

FOR NINE MONTHS AFTER MARK AND I DECIDED TO SEPARATE, we lived together in daily confrontation, sharing our apartment, car, summer house and children. When he finally moved out, our nastiness only escalated. We were in the thick of a legal battle, hiring experts to protect us and marshalling friends to support us. One of Mark's buddies, whose loft apartment overlooked mine, had a telescope pointed at my bedroom window. I made sure several of my friends were ready to testify in court to Mark's insensitivity and cruelty. We were frightened, angry and guilty, and eager to point fingers.

Mark and I never meant to hurt our children. Yet, in the wake of our separation, 11-year-old Jennifer, anguished by divided loyalties, developed into a precocious caretaker, fiercely protective of everyone, especially her younger brother. Eight-year-old Jeremy began lying and having problems in school. He looked depressed. One day, when I saw him leaning dangerously

BY MELINDA BLAU

> **I gave lip service to wanting the divorce and the ensuing freedom, but I was petrified of being self-supporting.**

out over a bannister, I called out to him, "Watch out! You might fall."

"I don't care," he answered. He meant it.

It was 1981 when I asked my lawyer to include family therapy in our separation agreement. He told me that divorcing parents just didn't do that. "Besides," he added smugly, "Mark will never go for it." To Mark's credit, he did.

By the time we all piled into the cramped office in downtown Manhattan for our first family therapy appointment, we already were swirling in a maelstrom of divorce madness. The therapists we consulted—a male-female team—were no match for us. Mark and I went at it, rehashing old arguments, not hearing anything except our own anger. The kids looked on, frozen, trapped in our rage. "Jeremy and I sat there in the same chair, our arms linked, like a wall," Jennifer, now 24, recalls. "I felt like the therapists talked down to us and I remember thinking, 'I can't believe these people can help us. What's the point of being here?' "

We quit the team after two sessions. In retrospect, it's too bad we didn't immediately find another (better) therapist, because among other benefits, I would later discover, weekly or biweekly appointments act as a control on warring parents. Had we continued in therapy at that time, I doubt if I would have pulled some of the outrageously vindictive acts I committed, like appearing at our beach house with a policeman in tow to oust Mark and his girlfriend. I was sure it was "my" weekend.

Our legal divorce was finalized in 1983, but achieving an emotional separation proved far more elusive. We had joint custody and every intention of cooperating as coparents—except we didn't know how. And our children, now living part-time with each of us, stumbled between our houses on a path littered with our marital debris.

We were typical of so many of our generation who separated during the '80s. I gave lip service to wanting the divorce and the ensuing freedom, but I was petrified of being self-supporting. Mark was already planning a second wedding, but he was still enmeshed in our marriage. Our relationship personified an expression his mother often used: "The rocks in his head filled the holes in hers!" We were unable to separate because we weren't two separate people. I needed his financial strength; he needed my emotional strength, and our children needed us both to grow up.

By the end of the following year—four years after we had initially separated—our chaotic family system had expanded to include Mark's and my significant others, and we knew we had to find a good family therapist. Over the next two years in Dr. Porter's office, the groundwork for a solid coparenting partnership was laid, partly as the direct result of his intervention, partly as the result of seeds he planted that later took root, partly in spite of what he did or didn't do. The process wasn't perfect, but it made us reckon with the fact that even though we had ended the marriage, we were still a family. Family therapy helped Mark and me salvage our divorce, if not our marriage.

My greatest accomplishment was learning how to stay out of Mark's relationship with our children. When they came home complaining about the many injustices inflicted on them at Dad's—like the lists of chores Susan, his new wife, gave them, or how often he took her side—I grasped, ever so slowly and imperfectly, that I had to listen without commenting.

It wasn't easy. Offhanded remarks like, "Dad pays more attention to Susan than he does to us," or "Susan's mean to us" were meant to incite and invite. It sparked an already intense competition, confirming that I was the "better" parent, that the kids only talked behind *his* back. Sure, I had read all the books and I understood what the therapist meant when he told us not to "triangulate" our communication—but changing my behavior was another story.

A defining moment occurred for me the day Jeremy spouted off yet again about Mark's lack of interest in him. For once, I didn't commiserate, didn't secretly gloat, didn't subtly point out that it probably wasn't poor, inept Dad's fault (as in, "Dad is doing the best he can—maybe he was just distracted"). Instead, I restrained myself, thought for a moment, and realized I finally had to stop allowing myself to be baited. I led my son to the telephone so that he could discuss his gripe directly with his dad.

Sometimes, my children were the best teachers—perhaps because they were, unwittingly, the best students. The divorce itself made them keen observers of our behavior, and therapy then made them more savvy about the complex dynamics that buffeted their lives. Mark would tell me I needed to "back off," and the therapist would exhort me to stop "overfunctioning," but it took Jennifer, then 13, to point out the futility of my self-appointed caretaking (and controlling) role. We were walking down the street one day and in her most somber, grown-up tone, Jen told me, "You know, Mom, you and Dad really are different, and no matter what you do, you can't make up for what he doesn't do."

I looked at her quizzically, half hoping that this was some sort of left-handed compliment. "I mean," she went on, "he's not really strict with us, and you think that you have to be tougher because he's not. But he's probably always going to be kind of laid back. Some things just aren't important to him; he just doesn't care the same way about things." I thought to myself, "How did she get so smart?" Mark's not caring as much as I about rules or schedules or where the kids' clothing ended up didn't mean that he didn't care about *them*. And while the moment wasn't marked by a miraculous on-the-spot transformation, realizing that my 13-year-old daughter was on to me somehow made me work a little harder from that point on.

ALWAYS THE JOURNALIST, I VOWED I'd write about "all this" someday. More than a decade later, while writing *Families Apart*, I surveyed and interviewed countless other coparents to find out what helped them "get through the fire," as one father put it, and how they changed their perceptions of each other from ex-spouse to coparent.

"Basically, if we hadn't gone into family therapy, I don't think we would have known how to redefine our relationship or been able to parent together," says filmmaker Carrie Lord, who sought help when she first separated and her children were 8 and 5. A child of divorce herself, who rarely saw her father, Lord admits, "I didn't want history to repeat itself. And my ex-husband didn't want to lose the kids. But we knew so little about co-

parenting, we needed help doing it."

Lord's comment is typical of the 20 percent of respondents to my questionnaire who checked off "family therapy" as one of several factors affecting their post-divorce parenting relationships. They were grateful to have an objective, sensitive outsider who could strengthen their weakened family. They also noted other therapeutic pluses: enhanced communication, gentle guidance about their kids' reactions, warnings about potential problems, concrete suggestions for designing and modifying a parenting plan. In short, therapists taught them how to share the daunting task of raising a child with someone they would just as soon never see again.

But the responses also reveal a dark side to therapy—mistakes, unintended outcomes, bad judgment calls. While some family therapists can be uncannily astute in assessing a family's problems and helping them move forward, others can impose their own agendas or allow sessions to fly out of control. Typically, coparents base their complaints on what they perceive to be practitioners' ineptitude, inexperience, lack of knowledge, personal bias, bad chemistry. But a client also can be put off by an indescribable, idiosyncratic something that a therapist would never even imagine: the color scheme of the office, an insensitive first question, the therapist's demeanor or dress. Indeed, when Deborah Nachum recalls her last-ditch effort to save her marriage in couples therapy, she can only remember the tie tack their psychiatrist wore: a gold duck embossed with the letters Q-U-A-C-K in the shape of its body. "I took one look at his tie pin and didn't hear a word after that," she says. "I refused ever to go back."

We divorcing clients, so out of control and uncertain ourselves, are filled with fear approaching therapy. Will a family therapist try to keep us together? Will the therapist take the other parent's side? What if I like the therapist, but the other parent doesn't? Will therapy work if I go alone? And, if I'm in a room with an ex-partner who is out to get me, will the therapist be able to handle the highly combustible feelings we bring into the office?

Some practitioners can't. The therapy team we first consulted, for example, was unable to manage our fury. They were incapable of creating a safety zone, and everyone in our family felt it. All that remains for me of the experience is a faint, unpleasant memory of a dimly lit room, feeling suffocated and alone, drowning in a sea of hostility and guilt.

It was even worse for Jeremy, who, at 8, found the experience confusing and frightening. "I was too young—I had no idea what the problem was except that my parents weren't getting along," Jeremy remembers. "You guys would be in a steamed argument and I'd be just sitting there, scared, feeling I had no control over my life." It seems obvious now that the therapists exhibited extremely bad judgment in seeing us as a family without first interviewing Mark and me.

We began seeing Dr. Porter a few years later. My children, although more impressed with his ability to control the sessions, nevertheless claim they were still disenfranchised by the process. Jeremy says that he often "spaced out," and no one seemed to notice. "I'd sit there and sometimes I'd be listening, but other times I'd be sitting there ignoring everyone, making no eye contact," he says. "A lot of the time I never got called on or even noticed." He also had trouble understanding how abstract concepts could change real life. "Therapists ought to recap for the kids what was said and ask them how they think and feel about it."

Jennifer's lingering criticism is that no one heeded the kids' repeated objections to their complex schedule (they went to Mark's every Thursday, every other weekend, and alternate Mondays): "My friends used to tease me about it," she recalls. "We wanted to switch houses every other week, but you said that was too long."

Certainly, the parenting plan met

He made it sound so simple. I thought, "How can he know that's what I want?" But I was so overwhelmed, I figured he probably did.

Mark's and my needs, but both we and the therapist failed to take into account how stressful the constant moving about was for them. Looking back, I wonder if the therapist even saw the situation from the kids' perspective. If so, couldn't he have tried harder to make us understand it? Could any therapist have broken through our self-absorbed denial? I, for one, probably wasn't ready to listen. I "had" the kids eight days; Mark "had" them six—and I was desperate not to lose control. If ours was a corporation, I saw myself as the major shareholder. Parenting, at that time in my life, was the only arena in which I felt I had some control.

Even in therapy, I felt insecure about my ability to hold my own. I always had the gnawing feeling that our therapist favored Mark, saw him as the successful entrepreneur—the one paying the bill—while I was the hysterical one. I remember leaving the office furious one day because the psychiatrist had called me an "alarmist" for expressing concern about then-14-year-old Jeremy's pot-smoking. My family of origin was riddled with alcoholism; I was just beginning to come to terms with how that shaped my life. I remember thinking, "This guy knows nothing about alcoholism." I felt put down, shut down and diminished—a complaint I heard from several mothers who reported similar experiences with male *and* female practitioners; out of prejudice or ignorance, therapists dismissed their concerns or failed to pick up important clues.

Michelle Varnet, a respondent to my questionnaire, believes that the psychiatrist she and her husband, Donald, saw for marital therapy carelessly accelerated their separation and was blind to or disregarded important issues that had impacted on their marriage. Having emigrated here from France, Michelle was frightened and felt cut off from her family. Her mother had been depressed and threatened suicide all her life; then her closest brother killed himself. A year later, while dating Donald, she got pregnant. They decided on an abortion, but the following year, she was pregnant again. Donald, then a medical student, still didn't want a baby or marriage—he got both.

"In the years preceding the breakup, there was a lot of trauma, and our therapist considered none of it," says Michelle. "The only thing addressed was, 'There you are—two young people who don't get along.' But given my life at that point, how could I have an intimate relationship?"

She still gets angry when she thinks about their second session. "The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair and said, with complete confidence, 'Well, the two of you are young people with your whole lives ahead of you. You need help getting separated and going on with your lives.' He was fresh out of school, young and enthusiastic about divorce and coparenting. He made it sound so simple. I thought, 'How can he know that's what I want?' But I was so overwhelmed, I figured he probably did."

Michelle has since replayed the scene in her mind a hundred times. "Even though I had mixed feelings about the marriage ending, at that point in my life I didn't feel entitled to say I wanted to work on the relationship. When I look back, I often think divorce probably was not what I wanted, even though it may have looked like I was the one who was ready to leave."

EVEN WITH THE BEST THERAPIST, of course, it requires an heroic effort for parents to get themselves back on track after divorce and, at the same time, minister to their children's needs. Many well-intentioned divorcing parents struggle for years with demons out of their control. In our hearts, most of us know it's not right to hang onto the anger, to manipulate our children's feelings, or to be less than supportive of the other parent. As one mother admitted, "My anger was just something I couldn't stop." Often, we only are able to effect change when something—usually a child in crisis—forces our backs to the wall. Sadly, that's when we're most ready to listen to a therapist's advice.

Which is precisely what happened with Elena Costos and Jim Miller six years after their divorce. Ostensibly, it was 9-year-old Nicholas's "horrible treatment" of his 4-year-old half-brother, Jon, that brought the family into therapy, but their difficulties had been germinating long before. Technically, Elena and Jim had been coparenting from the outset, although they and their respective new spouses, Neil and Bonnie, had very little contact, except when they argued over time and money. "We called the therapist because we were worried about Nicholas, but he didn't even want to see Nicholas," Elena explains. "At the time, I didn't think of it as family therapy—we were just trying to figure out what to do with our son!"

Recalling that first session, Jim explains, "We are all lawyers, Elena and Neil, Bonnie and I—opinionated and used to managing our own cases. The therapist knew he had four big egos to deal with. He told us, 'I don't need to get Nicholas in here—I want to see you four!'" The therapist explained to them that they had to form what stepfamily experts John and Emily Visher call a "parenting coalition"—an executive committee jointly responsible for the children's welfare. "We spent the next several sessions mostly learning how to communicate with one another," recounts Jim. "What he said was no big thing, just, 'You have to talk. You have to get together and work out rules, because every week there will be incidents at each house, and you have to let each other know what happens.'"

Gradually, a ritual developed organically out of that therapeutic experience: the four adults began having dinner after the sessions to hash out strategies for dealing with the kids. "It was like paradise for us all to be talking," says Jim. "There weren't any secrets—the kids couldn't get away with anything.

Jim recalls therapy having an "immediate effect on Nicholas's behavior." He stopped being disruptive in school; he was more diligent about homework. Elena recounts an incident, several months later, when, one afternoon, Nicholas came home from school later than usual. Neil sensed that the fast-talking 9-year-old was hiding something, checked out Nicholas's story and caught him in a lie about his after-school whereabouts. "Neil immediately called Jim," says Elena, "and, together, they discussed what might be appropriate consequences. Then Neil told Nicholas what the punishment was. Since Nicholas was going to be with Jim that weekend, Jim ended up enforcing it."

As much as therapy helped, Elena also credits time. "As the kids got older, I got a little smarter." She notes, too, that when Nicholas began having trouble in school

a year or two after terminating family therapy, "We were ready to call in the expert again—after all, isn't that what affluent, intelligent parents tend to do? But then we all realized that there was nothing new he could say or do. We knew what the problem was, so we all put our heads together again."

In Mark's and my case, as in many other coparents' sagas, the most startling change occurred when we were no longer in therapy. After his first year at Landmark, a prep school in Massachusetts that helped Jeremy make up time lost to undiagnosed dyslexia, he announced that he planned to drive cross-country with some older friends to attend an Anarchists' Convention. When Mark and I proclaimed a loud, unilateral "No," our then 15-year-old son threatened to run away. Even though I took all his money, grounded him and threatened to stop at nothing to keep him from going, one night he stole out into the darkness.

He was gone for 18 desperate, frightening, infuriating, frustrating, tearful days. In the past, I would have done what I always did: take complete charge of the situation, give Mark "assignments," and then check up on him to make sure he was doing it "right" (read "my way"). But I didn't. Perhaps the affects of four years of therapy kicked in; perhaps I had grown up. I decided instead to do what I do best—research, talk, write lists, make phone calls. I scoured my memory for clues, friends' names, interests. I plotted Grateful Dead concerts across the country. I called police precincts to find out who the Anarchists were and where (let alone why!) they were having a convention. I posed as a journalist from *Rolling Stone* who was researching the '60s.

I checked in regularly with Mark, reporting my progress, asking for his emotional support. We didn't argue once during those 18 days; we didn't polarize our positions as we so often had in the past whenever there were problems with the kids. I didn't criticize him or blame him for what Jeremy had done—and he didn't get defensive. I was no longer trying to change him into me; he no longer thought he had to be me. Instead of picking at each other's differences, we were united in our common bond. He was, after all, the only other person in the world who was as concerned about Jeremy as I was.

Jeremy was finally picked up by the Sacramento Police Department and put on a plane. On a hot Sunday in late July, a very dirty, bedraggled and angry young man disembarked from that plane. He told us that if we hadn't "caught" him, he had planned to enroll in an "alternative high school," live in a shelter and eat in soup kitchens—a rebellious middle-class boy's dream of adventure. At one point, he snapped nastily at me, "I don't care if you love me. Why don't you just leave me alone?" Suddenly Mark snapped back, and, for the first time since our divorce seven years before, told our son, "You can't talk to your mother like that."

It was a shining moment, a triumph for us as coparents and a real turning point in Jeremy's history. Mark and I finally had sealed the cracks. We respected and accepted each other; we knew we had different gifts to give our children. That fall, Jeremy's school counselor complimented us, "It's very unusual to see divorced parents working together so well."

Certainly, family therapy helped us get there. The process forced us to look into our children's eyes and see the effects of our own behavior; it compelled us to at least begin to listen. At worst, a therapist can be insensitive, biased, lacking in insight or knowledge; at best, a good coach who sets up the plays. But, ultimately, we coparents have to run with the ball. ■

Melinda Blau is the author of Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting *(G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994); she writes the bimonthly "New Family" column for* Child *and is a contributing editor to* New Woman *and* American Health. *Address: Box 222, Northampton, MA 01061-0222.*