

## Issue 20: Introduction

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# How Harmful Is Divorce to Children?

According to demographer Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University, about half of recent first marriages will end in dissolution. Slightly more than half of all divorces involve minor children (i.e., under the age of 18), and it is estimated that about 40 percent of all U.S. children will experience parental divorce before reaching adulthood. Therefore, divorce is a common experience in our society. It does not seem to be an experience that people feel neutral about, however. In fact, the issue of divorce has evoked strong emotional responses from politicians, scholars, government officials, and hosts of others.

Paul Amato (2000), Penn State University sociologist, concluded from his review of the research on divorce during the 1990s,

on one side are those who see divorce as an important contributor to many social problems. On the other side are those who see divorce as a largely benign force that provides adults with a second chance for happiness and rescues children from dysfunctional and aversive home environments. Based on the accumulated research of the 1990s—and of earlier decades—it is reasonable to conclude that both of these views represent one-sided accentuations of reality. . . . Divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well being that improve over time, and forces others on a downward cycle from which they might never fully recover. (p. 1282)

The following two articles give you a flavor of the sorts of arguments about divorce that are common. As you read look for *inflammatory language* (as a hint, the terms “broken families” and “family values crusaders” are used, both denoting stigma). Although there is certainly research indicating that, on average, children whose parents divorce do slightly less well on many outcomes (e.g., depression, learning difficulties), the differences are small. The problem comes when the meaning of these differences is misunderstood and generalized to all children who have experienced divorce.

Another problem with the conclusions people draw from the literature on divorce is that we tend to look for “one-variable solutions”—we want to find one cause for problems. For example, if a child has a reading problem and his parents are divorced, the divorce must be the cause of the reading problem. Unfortunately, one-variable explanations are almost never applicable in human behavior. Divorce is a complex process. It is obvious that there is still much that we need to know about divorce.

### Reference

- Amato, P. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *The Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269–1287. ♦

## Staying Together for the Sake of the Children

Walter Kirn

One afternoon when Joanne was 9 years old she came home from school and noticed something missing. Her father's jewelry box had disappeared from its usual spot on her parents' bureau. Worse, her mother was still in bed. "Daddy's moved out," her mother told her. Joanne panicked. She began to sob. And even though Joanne is 40 now, a married Los Angeles homemaker with children of her own, she clearly remembers what she did next that day. Her vision blurred by tears, she searched through the house that was suddenly not a home for the jewelry box that wasn't there.

Time heals all wounds, they say. For children of divorce like Joanne, though, time has a way of baring old wounds too. For Joanne, the fears that her parents' split unleashed feelings—of abandonment, of loss, of coming home one day and noticing something missing from the bedroom—deepened as the years went by. Bursts of bitterness, jealousy, and doubt sent her into psychotherapy. "Before I met my husband," she remembers,

I sabotaged all my other relationships with men because I assumed they would fail. There was always something in the back of my head. The only way I can describe it is a void, unfinished business that I couldn't get to.

For America's children of divorce—a million new ones every year—unfinished business is a way of life. For adults, divorce is a

conclusion, but for children it's the beginning of uncertainty. Where will I live? Will I see my friends again? Will my mom's new boyfriend leave her too? Going back to the early '70s—the years that demographers mark as the beginning of a divorce boom that has receded only slightly despite three decades of hand wringing and worry—society has debated these children's predicament in much the same way that angry parents do: By arguing over the little ones' heads or quarreling out of earshot, behind closed doors. Whenever concerned adults talk seriously about what's best for the children of divorce, they seem to hold the discussion in a setting—a courtroom or legislature or university where young folks aren't allowed.

That's changing. The children are grown now, and a number are speaking up, telling stories of pain that didn't go away the moment they turned 18 or even 40. A cluster of new books is fueling a backlash, not against divorce itself but against the notion that kids somehow coast through it. Stephanie Staal's *The Love They Lost* (Delacorte Press), written by a child of divorce, is part memoir and part generational survey, a melancholy volume about the search for love by kids who remember the loss of love too vividly. *The Case for Marriage* by Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher (Doubleday) emphasizes the positive, arguing that even rocky marriages nourish children emotionally and practically.

The most controversial book comes from Judith Wallerstein, 78, a therapist and retired lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (Hyperion) she argues that the harm caused by divorce is graver and longer lasting than we suspected. Her work raises a question that some folks felt was settled back in the days of *Love American Style*: Should parents stay together for the kids?

Listening to children from broken families is Wallerstein's lifework. For nearly three decades, in her current book and two previous ones, she has compiled and reflected on the stories of 131 children of divorce. Based on lengthy, in-depth interviews, the stories are seldom happy. Some are tragic. Almost all of them are as moving as good fiction. There's the story of Paula, who as a girl told Wallerstein, "I'm going to find a new mommy," and as a young woman—too young, it turned out—impulsively married a man she hardly knew. There's Billy, born with a heart defect, whose parents parted coolly and amicably but failed to provide for his pressing medical needs.

It's the rare academic who can make a reader cry. Maybe that's why, with each new installment, Wallerstein's study has created shock waves, shaping public opinion and even the law. Her attention-getting style has proved divisive. For experts in the field of family studies (who tend to quarrel at least as bitterly as the dysfunctional clans they analyze), she's a polarizing figure. To her admirers, this mother of three and grandmother of five, who has been married to the same man for 53 years, is a brave, compassionate voice in the wilderness. To her detractors, she's a melodramatic doomsayer, a crank.

What drew someone from such a stable background to the study of marital distress? At the end of the 1960s, Wallerstein, whose Ph.D. is in clinical psychology, took a job consulting at a large community mental health center in Marin County just as the social dam began to crack. "We started to get complaints," she says, "from nursery school teachers and parents: 'Our children are having a very hard time. What should we do?'"

The prevailing view at the time, she says, was that divorce was no big deal for kids. So much for the power of positive thinking. "We began to get all these questions," Wallerstein remembers. "The children were sleepless. The children in the nursery school were aggressive. They were out of control." When Wallerstein hit the library for answers, she discovered there were none. The research hardly existed, so she decided to do her own. She had a hunch about what she would learn. "I saw a lot of children very upset," she says, "but I fully expected that it would be fleeting."

Her hunch was wrong. Paradise for kids from ruptured families wasn't easily regained. Once cast out of the domestic garden, kids dreamed of getting back in. The result more often than not was frustration and anxiety. Children of divorce suffer depression, learning difficulties and other psychological problems more frequently than those of intact families. Some of Wallerstein's colleagues, not to mention countless divorced parents, felt they were being guilt-tripped by a square. They didn't want to hear this somber news.

Now, decades later, some still don't want to hear her. For parents, her book's chief finding, to be sure, is hardly upbeat or very reassuring: children take a long time to get over divorce. Indeed, its most harmful and profound effects tend to show up as the children reach maturity and struggle to form their own adult relationships. They're gun shy. The slightest conflict sends them running. Expecting disaster, they create disaster. "They look for love in strange places," Wallerstein says. "They make terrible errors of judgment in whom they choose."

Marcie Schwalm, 26, a Bloomington, IL, legal secretary whose parents split when she was four, illustrates Wallerstein's thesis well. As a young woman she couldn't seem to stick with the same boyfriend. "I thought guys were for dating and for breaking up with a few weeks later," she says. "I would go into a relationship wondering how it was going to end." Finally, Marcie says, a college beau told her she had a problem. She's married now, and her feelings about divorce have a hardline, 1950s tone: "Divorce is not

something I am going to go through. I would do whatever it takes to keep the marriage together."

Krishna Herrndobler, 17, isn't so sure that harmony can be willed. Now a high school student in Benton, IL, she too was 4 when her parents called it quits. She says she has no memories of the trauma, just an abiding skepticism about marriage and a resolve to settle for nothing less than the ideal man. "I don't want my kids to wind up in a single-parent situation," she says.

And I don't want to have kids with a man  
I don't want to be married to forever. I  
don't believe in the fairy tale. I hope it ex-  
ists, but I really don't believe it does.

And therein lies another problem, according to Wallerstein; the belief, quite common in children of divorce, that marriage is either a fairy tale or nothing. These jittery, idealistic children tend to hold out for the perfect mate—only to find they have a very long wait. Worse, once they're convinced they've found him, they're often let down. High romantic expectations tend to give way, Wallerstein reports, to bitter disillusionments. Children from broken families tend to marry later, yet divorce more often than those from intact homes.

So divorce often screws up kids. In itself, this isn't news, though many experts feel Wallerstein overstates the case. That divorce may screw them up for a long, long time and put them at risk for everything from drug abuse to a loveless, solitary old age is more disturbing—and even more debatable.

Besides her conclusions on children's long-term prospects following divorce, Wallerstein makes another major point in her book—one that may result in talk-show fistfights. Here it is: Children don't need their parents to like each other. They don't even need them to be especially civil. They need them to stay together, for better or worse. This imperative comes with asterisks, of course, but fewer than one might think. Physical abuse, substance addiction, and other severe pathologies cannot be tolerated in any home. Absent these, however, Wallerstein stands firm; a lousy marriage,

at least where the children's welfare is concerned, beats a great divorce.

The shouting has already started. Family historian Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic) questions the value of papering over conflicts for the kids' sake. "For many couples," Coontz says,

things only get worse and fester, and eventually, five years down the road, they end up getting divorced anyway, after years of contempt for each other and outside affairs.

Coontz doesn't believe in social time travel. Unlike Wallerstein, whose investigation is deep but rather narrow (the families in her original study were all white, affluent residents of the same Northern California county, including non-working wives for whom divorce meant a huge upheaval), Coontz takes a long view of divorce. "In the 1940s the average marriage ended with the death of the spouse," Coontz says.

But life expectancy is greater today, and there is more potential for trouble in a marriage. We have to become comfortable with the complexity and ambiguity of every family situation and its own unique needs.

That's just a lot of fancy, high-flown talk to Wallerstein and her followers. Ambiguity doesn't put dinner on the table or drive the kids to soccer practice or save for their college education. Parents do. And parents tend to have trouble doing these things after they get divorced. In observing what goes wrong for kids when their folks decide to split, Wallerstein is nothing if not practical. It's not just the absence of positive role models that bothers her; it's the depleted bank accounts, the disrupted play-group schedules, the frozen dinners. Parents simply parent better, she's found, when there are two of them. Do kids want peace and harmony at home? Of course. Still, they'll settle for hot meals.

David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, says

There was a sense in the '70s especially, and even into the '80s, that the impact of

divorce on children was like catching a cold: they would suffer for a while and then bounce back.

he says. "More than anyone else in the country, Judith Wallerstein has shown that that's not what happens." Fine, but does this oblige couples to muddle through misery so that Johnny won't fire up a joint someday or dump his girlfriend out of insecurity? Blankenhorn answers with the sort of certainty one expects from a man with his imposing title.

If the question is, if unhappily married parents stay together for the sake of their kids, will that decision benefit their children?, the answer is yes.

We can guess how the moral stalwarts will answer such questions. What about ordinary earthlings? Virginia Gafford, 56, a pet product saleswoman in Pawleys Island, SC, first married when she was 19. The marriage lasted 3 years. She married again, had a second child, Denyse, and divorced again. Denyse was 14. She developed the classic symptoms. Boyfriends jilted her for being too needy. She longed for the perfect man, who was nowhere to be found. "I had really high expectations," says Denyse. "I wanted Superman, so they wouldn't do what Dad had done." Denyse is in college now and getting fine grades, but her mother still has certain regrets. "If I could go back and find any way to save that marriage, I'd do it," she says. "And I'd tell anyone else to do the same."

For Wallerstein and her supporters, personal growth is a poor excuse for dragging the little ones through a custody battle that just might divide their vulnerable souls into two neat, separate halves doomed to spend

decades trying to reunite. Anne Watson is a family-law attorney in Bozeman, MT, and has served as an administrative judge in divorce cases. Restless couples who merely need their space, in her opinion, had better think twice and think hard. "If people are divorcing just because of choices they want to make, I think it's pretty tough on the kids," Watson says. "Just because you're going to feel better, will they?"

That, of course, is the million-dollar question. Wallerstein's answer is no, they'll feel worse. They'll feel worse for quite a while, in fact, and may not know why until they find themselves in court, deciding where their own kids will spend Christmas. It's no wonder Wallerstein's critics find her depressing.

Her chief message to married parents is clear: Suck it up if you possibly can, and stick it out. But even if you agree with Wallerstein, how realistic is such Spartan advice? The experts disagree. Then again, her advice is not for experts. It's directed at people bickering in their kitchen and staring up at the ceiling of their bedroom. It's directed at parents who have already divorced and are sitting alone in front of the TV, contemplating a second try. The truth and usefulness of Wallerstein's findings will be tested in houses and apartments, in parks and playgrounds, not in sterile think tanks. Someday, assuming we're in a mood to listen, millions of children will give us the results. ♦

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Kirn, W. (September 25, 2000). "Should You Stay Together for the Sake of the Kids?" *Time*, 156 (13), 74-82. Copyright © 2000 Time Inc. Reprinted by permission.

## Divorcing Reality

*Stephanie Coontz*

Every time it seems America may finally be coming to terms with how much and how irreversibly our families have changed, a new wave of panic breaks over us. Most recently it's been a rediscovery of the "catastrophe" of divorce. This past summer a new law took effect in Louisiana, giving people the chance to choose a "covenant marriage" in which the state will enforce an agreement not to divorce except for adultery, physical or sexual abuse, alcoholism, or a year's abandonment. The sponsor of the bill says he has since received calls from lawmakers all over the country inquiring how to institute similar laws. At least 19 states already have legislation pending to "slow down" divorce.

Most of the ammunition for this campaign is drawn from Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal study of 131 children whose parents divorced in 1971. In 1989, Wallerstein published a study claiming that almost half had experienced serious long-term psychological problems that interfered with their love and work lives. This summer she released an update based on 26 of these young adults, all of whom had been 2 to 4 years old when their parents separated. They had been extremely vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse as teens, she reported, and were still plagued in their 20s and 30s by unstable relationships with their fathers, low educational achievement and severe anxieties about commitment.

The media pounced. I found more than 200 newspaper articles and opinion pieces trumpeting the "new" finding that divorce was "worse than we thought," a "catastro-

phe" for kids. While Wallerstein herself opposes legal restrictions on divorce, she has done little to distance herself from those who cite her work in support of the new crusade. "I've been so misquoted in America," she told Mother Jones two years ago. "I cannot worry about it anymore."

But there is good reason to worry about the massive publicity accorded Wallerstein's work. Her estimates of the risks of divorce are more than twice as high as those of any other reputable researcher in the field. Her insistence that the problems she finds were caused by the divorce itself, rather than by pre-existing problems in the marriage, represents an oversimplified notion of cause and effect repudiated by most social scientists and contradicted by her own evidence.

Wallerstein studied 60 Marin County couples, mostly white and affluent, who divorced in 1971. Her sample was drawn from families referred to her clinic because they were already experiencing adjustment problems. Indeed, participants were recruited by the offer of counseling in exchange for commitment to a long-term study. This in itself casts serious doubt on the applicability of Wallerstein's findings. The people most likely to be attracted to an offer of long-term counseling and most likely to stick with it over many years are obviously those most likely to feel they need it. And after 25 years in a study about the effects of divorce, the children are unlikely to consider any alternative explanations of the difficulties they have had in their lives.

Wallerstein says she tried to weed out severely disturbed children, yet the appendix to her original study, published in 1980, admits that only one-third of the families she worked with were assessed as having "adequate psychological functioning" prior to the divorce. Half the parents had chronic depression, severe neurotic difficulties, or "long-standing problems in controlling their rage or sexual impulses." Nearly a quarter of the couples reported that there had been violence in their marriages. It is thus likely that many of the problems since experienced by their children stemmed from the parents' bad marriages rather than their divorces, and would not have been averted had the couples stayed together. Other researchers studying children who do poorly after divorce have found that behavior problems were often already evident eight to 12 years before the divorce took place, suggesting that both the maladjustment and the divorce were symptoms of more deep-rooted family and parenting issues.

This is not to say that all the problems Wallerstein found can be explained by pre-existing family dynamics. While children in intact families with high levels of conflict usually do worse than children in divorced or never-married families, children's well-being often does deteriorate when a marriage not marked by severe conflict comes to an end. Divorce can trigger new difficulties connected to loss of income, school relocation, constriction of extended family ties, or escalation of hostility over issues like custody and finances. (In Wallerstein's sample, many women had not been employed during the marriage; forced entry into the workplace increases the risk of depression and distraction, which can affect the quality of parenting.) Intense conflict after divorce can be even more damaging to children than intense conflict within marriage.

Still, more representative samples of kids from divorced parents yield much lower estimates of risk than Wallerstein's. Paul Amato and Bruce Keith, reviewing nearly every single quantitative study that has been done on divorce, found some clear as-

sociations with lower levels of child well-being. But these were, on average, "not large." And the more carefully controlled the studies under review, the smaller were the differences reported.

Interestingly, children whose parents divorced in more recent generations are experiencing less severe problems than those whose parents divorced when laws and social stigmas were stricter. Indeed, a just-published study of 160 Boston-area families conducted by psychologist Abigail Stewart found that while most youngsters had slightly poorer than average mental health a few months after the divorce, their overall mental health had rebounded to average levels after 18 months.

Wallerstein rejects these studies because they do not take account of what she terms a "sleeper effect," in which problems caused by divorce do not show up until years later. But larger long-term studies do not support this claim, though there may be a sleeper effect for children whose parents continue to battle after the separation. Mavis Hetherington, who has studied more than 1,500 children of divorced parents, reports that the large majority grow up socially and psychologically well-adjusted.

Some past studies have confirmed that children of divorced parents are more likely to get divorced themselves. But another new study shows that even this so-called inheritability of divorce is also on the decline. UCLA researcher Nicholas Wolfinger found that between 1974 and 1993 there was a 50 percent decrease in the tendency for people whose parents had divorced to get divorced themselves.

Family values crusaders often argue explicitly that a little bit of exaggeration, or at least a use of worst-case scenarios, is justified in discussing the effects of divorce because emphasis on children's resilience may lead couples to take divorce too lightly. It is probably true that some people are unwilling to do the hard work of trying to make a relationship succeed, or do not give sufficient thought to the difficulties they or their children may face after divorce. But rising rates of divorce and single parenthood come less from me-first individualism than

from long-term historical forces that are not going to be reversed by trying to scare or guilt-trip people into staying married.

If you graph the divorce rate since the 1890s, the current rate is exactly where you'd expect it to be from the trends during the first half of the century. The age of marriage is at an all-time high for women; at the other end of the line, a person who reaches age 60 can expect to live, on average, another 20 years. The institution of marriage organizes a smaller portion of people's lives and social roles than ever before. The economic autonomy of women means that dependence no longer preserves marriages, and the number of people who exist comfortably and happily outside marriage creates an ever-present alternative for people who are unhappy with their mates. No amount of coercion is going to put the toothpaste back in the tube.

In these circumstances, coercion would only make things worse for the very people the anti-divorce crusaders say they want to protect. Contrary to conservative rhetoric, women have historically needed the legal protection of divorce more than men have. For centuries, men's greater social and economic power forced many wives to put up with a husband's affairs or his humiliating treatment. Men also had more resources to fight a divorce or penalize a woman for "fault" under older laws. The fact that two-thirds of all divorces today are initiated by women indicates that many women are grateful for the easing of divorce laws.

One group of women has been badly hurt by no-fault divorce in the absence of strong alimony laws: Women who played by the old female homemaker rules and whose husbands threw out the rulebook altogether. But making divorce harder and more acrimonious would not protect these women. Would a woman who doesn't want a divorce really be better off if the law says her husband can't divorce her except in case of adultery or violence? What would prevent him from deserting the family, engaging in abuse, provoking her into a compromising situation or even fabricating evidence of her adultery? Better to make sure that strong child-support laws are enforced,

and that husbands whose wives sacrificed income and education for the sake of the marriage pay spousal support.

Slowing down divorce is not necessarily in the best interests of children either. If a couple can repair their marriage and develop an effective parental alliance, their kids will certainly benefit. But getting people to "try harder and longer" can make things worse if the marriage does eventually fail. Most studies find that divorces are more damaging for kids when they occur between the ages of 11 and 16 than when they occur between 7 and 11. This doesn't mean parents should rush into divorce, but it does mean that we should beware of frightening or pressuring couples into prolonging a marriage that may well end up being intolerable to one or the other.

We may be able to save more potentially healthy marriages than we currently do, but only by modernizing marriage, not by shoring up a model based on women's self-sacrifice. Modernizing marriage means getting men and women to share child care and housework more equally, helping couples to manage conflict in less destructive ways and building family-friendly workplaces that make it possible to raise children with less stress. (Of course, such measures will also make it easier for divorcing couples, single parents, and unmarried partners to raise children.)

It may be true, as conservatives charge, that lessening the stigma and stress attached to single parenting will lead some people to turn to divorce before exploring other options, but it's also true that as divorce has gotten more acceptable it has also gotten less damaging. In 1978, a national sample found that only 50 percent of divorced couples were able to contain or control their anger in a way that allowed them to co-parent effectively. A more recent California study of divorcing couples found that three to four years after separation, only a quarter of divorced parents were engaged in conflict-ridden co-parenting.

Similar progress has occurred in post-divorce parental contact. Surveys at the beginning of the '80s found that more than 50 percent of children living with divorced

mothers had not seen their fathers in the preceding year, while only 17 percent reported visiting their fathers weekly. But a 1988 survey found that 25 percent of previously married fathers saw their children at least once a week, and only 18 percent had not visited their children during the past year. As divorce has become more common, more fathers have begun to work out ways of remaining in touch with their children, while more mothers seem willing to encourage such involvement. Researchers can help promote these new trends by explaining what we know both about how to create better marriages and how to parent more effectively after a divorce.

Fortunately for the public, a national group of family researchers and clinicians

has just formed a new organization to coordinate and disseminate the latest research on family relations and trends in the United States. The Council on Contemporary Families will counter politicized and oversimplified pronouncements such as those in the current anti-divorce crusade with a more nuanced account of the changing circumstances and challenges facing today's diverse families. In the meantime, parents and the general public should take a hard, critical look at the claims of the anti-divorce crusade. ♦

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Coontz, S. (1997). "Divorcing Reality." *The Nation*, 265 (16), 21-24. Reprinted with permission from the November 17, 1997, issue of *The Nation*.