Divorce Has a Lasting Negative Impact

The major impact of divorce on the child is in adulthood, when the man-woman relationship moves center stage."

Judith Wallerstein is a **family** researcher and the author of a landmark study that presented the long-term negative effects of divorce on children. For thirty years, she studied six thousand children of divorce, some of them over a twenty-five year period in their lives. The following viewpoint appears in the anthology, *Marriage—Just a Piece of Paper?* In it, the author claims that although divorce might represent significant improvements in the lives of the adults who undergo it, divorce immediately upsets the lives of children from preschool through high school, with consequences that last into adulthood.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What were some unintended consequences of the passage of the "no-fault" divorce law in California in 1969?
2. In what ways does divorce contribute to "diminished parenting"?
3. What are some ways that the impact of divorce influences the structure and behavior of a child's adult life?

In 1969, California, which is a flagship state in **family** law, passed the first no-fault divorce law. It was developed out of a consortium of the right and the left. The law was written as a result of several task forces the last one headed by a woman who was a leading feminist and law professor, and it was signed by [Governor] Ronald Reagan. It was a day of great celebration in California because it would end trouble in marriage: People who had made a mistake could leave the marriage. They would obviously agree quietly and happily. Remarkably, there was no consideration, despite all the task forces, about how this major piece of **family** legislation would impact on children. You know, I can't believe it. It's a major part of history that shows how little we consider the impact of so much of legislation and so much of social change on the **family** and especially on children, who unfortunately don't vote....

I happened to come to California at that historic time, where I was in a ringside seat at a community mental health center. We got many telephone calls all of a sudden from agitated parents saying, "What am I going to do about my children? My husband and I have divorced, or are divorcing, and the children are aggressive. They're crying. They're acting up. They're not going to sleep. They're behaving in ways I've never seen before." The nursery school teacher called saying, "We don't know what to do." The calls came around preschool children. We looked at each other. It was a highly trained professional staff. I went to the library, being a scholar at heart, and I discovered that, lo and behold, there was no research, none, on the impact of divorce on children, despite, and I say ironically, our major efforts to change the **family**. We hadn't looked at this.

We saw children who were very frightened. There were sleep disturbances. Children who had never been particularly aggressive in elementary school and in preschool were hitting other children. The nursery school teachers and the elementary school teachers are saying these kids are out of control, and the only change that occurred in their lives had been the divorce of their parents....

**Divorce Makes Children Insecure**

The children had a sense of loss, and anger at their parents. Their great fear was that they would be abandoned. I mean, this is a wealthy country. We had largely middle-class children who had never been hungry in their lives who were suddenly afraid that they would starve to death, that they would wake up in the morning and there would be nobody to take care of them. They were overwhelmed with frightening fantasies that had to do with the fear that the scaffolding of their lives was collapsing under them.

So we decided to take children aged three to sixteen, and we went back a year later. Since I was very much in accord with community opinion, I had no reason to doubt it. I thought everything would be fine. Okay, so the kids were upset, but they would be over with it. I mean, a year is a long time in the life of a four year old. It's 25 percent of her life, right?

Lo and behold, the children were worse. Parents were more worried. There were economic problems which were beginning to surface which people hadn't expected. Child support wasn't paid automatically. Parent-child relationships changed a lot....

This one little girl told me that at age four she used to sit outside the bathroom door, which her mother would lock. Her mother would be in there studying for an exam that she was going to have the next day. The only peace and quiet the mom could have from the three children would be locking herself in the bathroom. The child would sit cross-legged outside the bathroom door, waiting for the mother to come out. This was a child who had been the center of her mother's life and the father's life. The father had an economic crisis. He disappeared, really, in great crisis, and in great trouble. The mom was out working during the day and going to school at night. When I saw the little girl, she said to me, "I'm looking for a mommy. I need a new mommy."

That's a difference in a child's life. That is different. Is it poor parenting? I hate to call that poor parenting. It's diminished parenting. It's tragically diminished parenting. But this is clearly a mother and a father who under other circumstances were both devoted to this child. So it's a crisis in the parents' lives. It's not an easy-come, easy-go decision, which then reverberates into the child's life. It is experienced by the child as an abandonment....

**It's Not Just Childhood**

The major impact of divorce is really in adulthood. The early reaction is very painful, but it fades after a few years if the **family** is reasonably functioning. The average number of years it takes is about three and a half or four years, something like that. But the major impact of divorce on the child is in adulthood, when the man-woman relationship moves center stage.

Divorce isn't any old crisis. It's not a tornado. It's not a death in the **family**. It's a very specific crisis of the breakdown of the relationship between the main man and the main woman in the child's life. Children, I've come to the conclusion, identify not only with their mom and their dad as people, as we've generally accepted, but they clearly internalize the relationship between them. They spend all their time observing the relationship between them. I know all the details, especially from the children in the intact **families** that I interviewed, about how Mom and Dad get along. Do they kiss each other? Does he pinch her? Do they dance? Are they angry? Do they talk? Do they fight in the open? Do they fight behind closed doors? When the bedroom door closes, does that mean they are fighting? Or are they making love? So that's a tremendous source of knowledge for any growing child. They spend their whole life studying that.

There is nothing they study in school that they look at as carefully as they do the man-woman relationship in their **family**. Their parents may have successfully decided to divorce, it may have been the best decision of their lives. From the child's perspective, they failed. It's very hard for grown-ups to realize. It doesn't mean they've failed, it means from their child's perspective they failed. From their child's perspective they failed to keep it together. She failed to keep the man; he failed to keep the lady. And they failed in their child's view at one of the major tasks of life and, for the young adult's view, the major task at that point.

They have trouble in their third decade of life, in their twenties, in knowing what they are looking for in a man or a woman, in believing that they can keep it together, in believing that they can have a lasting relationship. Their fear of failure is very powerful—as powerful (and this is their conflict) as their intense wish to do better than their parents did.

**"I Am Not My Parents"**

The tremendous inner conflict does and doesn't get resolved. This is their task in their twenties. They have to take that inner image of a failed man-woman relationship and disassociate themselves from it and give themselves another shot. They say, "I'm going to do it my way. I'm not my mom. I'm not my dad. I'm me." They acquire hope and confidence also from other arenas in their lives. So they have to learn from their own experience.

They are remarkable, really, in that they do for themselves what children really have a right to expect from their parents. They create their own morality. As one young person said to me, "Both my parents lied and cheated. I decided I'm never going to lie." They create their own morality, and many of them have a really very high morality. As one young woman said to me, "Sometimes I feel that I was brought up on a desert island. The idea of sex and love and intimacy all together is a strange idea to me. The guys I have a good time with, I really don't even like." But they put it together by the time they're thirty, thirty-one, or thirty-two. It takes them longer to grow up. They do it themselves, or it's the luck of the draw. They meet somebody. People change a lot in adulthood. They just don't grow up in childhood.

**Always Afraid of Loss**

The other residue in adulthood, which surprised me, because I didn't expect it, is the fact that almost all, and I say this very carefully, of the children of divorce, as adults, suffered with a residue of symptoms in which they were afraid that disaster would strike suddenly, unaware. The happier they were, the better their life, the better their job, the better their love life, the better their relationship, the better their children, the more frightened they became that they would lose it.

I think this is clearly **related** to what I said about the fact that so few of them expected the divorce when it happened. From their point of view, everything was going well and BOOM—the floor fell out from under them. We always tell everybody lightning doesn't strike twice because profoundly in our heart, we know it strikes twice. We all believe it strikes twice, so we reassure ourselves with false reassurances, and this is the fear of lightning striking twice.

Now, I'm not sure it ever goes away, in the same way that I'm not sure that a child of divorce ever fully trusts another person. I hate to say this, but I think it is true. I'm not sure a child of divorce ever fully trusts that another person will be there for them, will love them, will be dependable and will love them forever, whatever forever consists of. In some corner of their heart, there is the fear that that person won't be there in the morning, either will betray them or will abandon them....

**Parents' and Children's Needs Diverge**

We didn't realize that divorce doesn't rescue children. Divorce is a good thing for adults. For a lot of adults, it changes their lives very much for the better. But except in violence, and not always in violence, divorce doesn't rescue children from the loneliness and unhappiness of a marriage that they usually don't experience.

Divorce in the life of a child is entirely different than in the life of an adult. For an adult, it is a remedy. It brings a bad chapter of my life to an end and opens the door, and hopefully, with any luck, I'll do it better next time around. Doesn't always work, but then life doesn't always work out. But for the child, it's not a remedy, it's the loss of the **family**, and there is no substitute for that **family** that's lost.