**Divorce Hurts Children**

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Michelle Bryant, "The Divorce Dilemma: Sociologist Finds that Even Amicable Divorces Are Likely to Have Negative Effects on Children," *The University of Texas at Austin—Feature Story*, March 27, 2006. Reproduced by permission.

"[When parents divorce] negotiating the difference between the mother's world and the father's world leads to confusion and stress among the children and can have lasting consequences."

Michelle Bryant argues in the following viewpoint that divorce harms children in many ways. Children of divorce may lose faith in marriage and become unable to form intimate relationships, she says. Citing research, the author contends that, in most cases, children would be better off if parents with unhappy marriages did not divorce. She argues that divorce creates insecurity and requires children to negotiate between the conflicting worlds of their mothers and fathers. Bryant writes for the University of Texas at Austin's Web site.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to authorities quoted by the author, when do the worst symptoms of the "sleeper effect" from a parent's divorce often appear?
2. What fraction of marriages are so bad that it is better for the children if their parents divorce, according to the author?
3. According to the author, children of divorce are how much more likely to be asked by a parent to keep a secret from another parent?

While amicable divorces are certainly better than the alternative, particularly when children are involved, a new national study shows they still take a toll on children's overall well-being, as well as their own future marital success.

Surprisingly, persons whose parents had a good divorce had, on average, the least successful marriages of any of the categories of persons compared. Their results differed significantly from persons whose parents had bad divorces involving destructive behaviors or low-conflict but not happy marriages. Results for that group were considerably poorer than those whose parents had a happy marriage.

"If the parents whose marriage failed are obviously good people who could cooperate and avoid destructive behaviors after the divorce, their offspring may be more inclined to lose confidence in the institution of marriage itself," said Dr. Norval Glenn, sociologist at The University of Texas at Austin and coinvestigator for the study. "Even by being good people and by marrying good people, they feel they cannot assure that their marriage will work."

Glenn, with Elizabeth Marquardt, author of *Between Two Worlds*, codirected the first nationally representative sample survey of 750 children of divorce, ages 18-35 and conducted in-depth interviews with 35 others in the same age range in various parts of the country. For comparative purposes, the researchers also surveyed and did in-depth interviews with an equal number of persons in the same age range whose parents did not divorce. The interview questions were specifically designed to capture the child's perspective. Most previous literature has been written from that of the parents.

Divorce seems to be the most traumatic on those children whose parents were not in a high-conflict marriage. The divorce catches them totally by surprise.

Research in a recent book by Judith Wallerstein, a pioneer in the psychological effects of divorce in children and young people, shows that experiencing parental divorce during childhood has a "sleeper effect." Its worst symptoms often appear when children of divorce leave home and try to form intimate relationships and **families** of their own, but do so with much less ability to trust and little idea of what a lasting marriage looks like.

"Persons whose parents had extremely bad marriages and bad divorces may be able to blame the failure of their parents' marriage on bad behavior by the parents," Glenn said. "They may not, therefore, lose confidence in the institution of marriage."

He cautions that if there is violence or extreme conflict, or if the marriage is so bad it leaves the primary parent, usually the mother, so depressed she can't parent effectively, the children are usually better off after the parents divorce. However, only a minority of the divorces of couples with children is of this nature—probably no more than about a third. The remainder of the marriages did not clearly have detrimental effects on the well-being or development of the children, and ended because one or both of the spouses felt the marriage was unsatisfactory.

"In most of these cases, the children would almost certainly have benefited from the parents staying together," said Glenn. "These are the cases for which it makes sense to talk about negative consequences of divorce. For persons whose parents had high conflict marriages, it makes sense to talk about negative consequences of failed parental marriages, but the divorces themselves may typically lessen those consequences."

"Good divorce," a term introduced by Constance Ahrons's influential 1994 book titled *The Good Divorce*, typically is used to describe the amicable divorce that avoids pitfalls such as involving children in parental conflict. It has been thought to prevent or substantially lessen the negative consequences on children, supporting the notion that divorce itself is less important than the way parents handle it. However, this is not quite correct in terms of the effects on children. While divorces that end highly destructive marriages are, in one sense, "good divorces," in that they are better than the alternative, they aren't "good" in an absolute sense.

"Oftentimes, if you ask the parents they will say the kids are doing just fine, but if you ask the kids they might not agree," Glenn said.

"We found that it is indeed better for parents to have a 'good divorce' than a bad one," he said, "but that having a 'good divorce' seems to only slightly reduce some negative effects of a parental divorce and to reduce others not at all."

In terms of the overall assessment of their pre-adult quality of life, the persons whose parents had a "good divorce" fared more poorly than persons whose parents had a low-conflict, but not happy intact marriage and considerably more poorly than those whose parents had a happy intact marriage.

Grown children of divorce were seven times more likely to agree with the statement, "I was alone a lot as a child." The frequent absence of their parents—whether they were living in another household, working or dating—made a lasting impact.

"One thing that children of divorce have to deal with, particularly if the divorce occurs early in their lives, is the entry and exit of adults other than their biological parents into their lives, such as boyfriends and girlfriends and live-in boyfriends and girlfriends," Glenn said. "They develop emotional attachments with people who sometimes disappear from their lives, which gives the children the feeling that no attachment is secure."

Many respondents noted having to grow up too soon and the feeling of having to carefully negotiate between two parents' worlds—which may have held different beliefs, values and lifestyles. As a result, many children of divorce said they felt divided.

"Many respondents reported that they felt like essentially they had to be different people with their father and their mother," said Glenn. "They had to develop a chameleon personality."

The survey revealed that of those respondents whose parents had a "good divorce," half agreed with the statement, "I always felt like an adult, even when I was a little kid," while more than two-thirds from a bad divorce said the same thing.

Just one-third of young adults from divorced **families** said that when they were young and needed comfort, they went to one or both of their parents, compared with two-thirds of those with married parents. The grown children of divorce were more likely to have gone to siblings or friends or to have dealt with problems on their own. They also stated a greater need to protect their parents.

In many circumstances, the children kept secrets from one parent about the other, even if they weren't asked to, to circumvent conflict. In other instances, children from divorces were more than twice as likely to be explicitly asked by a parent to keep a secret from the other parent.

The materials from the interviews indicated that even when parents have the very best kind of divorce—in terms of having a friendly and cooperative relationship—negotiating the differences between the mother's world and the father's world leads to confusion and stress among the children and can have lasting consequences.