

The Impact of Divorce on Children

For many years the prevailing view has been that divorce was not only traumatic for children but contributed to negative life outcomes for the majority of those whose parents divorced. Recently, however, in "For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered" by Hetherington and Kelly (2002), a new picture has emerged. **The good news? 75% of the children of divorce did not end up having serious psychological, social, or academic problems. The bad news? 25% of the children from divorce did end up having such problems.**

It is immediately important to further clarify these percentages. Historically divorce research has been relatively short-term, generally exploring the first two years post-divorce, which is clearly the period of greatest upheaval and, therefore, the time when all parties, parents and children, look the worst. Hetherington, a research psychologist, not only has been following some families for 30 years but many for ten years or more. Also, where most research has just looked at divorced families, Hetherington compared divorced families to non-divorced families, providing much more refined data. This article will report on a number of her findings along with some of my own observations.

The importance of comparing the two types of families becomes immediately apparent when discussing the negative outcome rates for children. **Since 10% of the children from non-divorced families in Hetherington's research had significant problems, the "true cost" of divorce is an additional 15% of children with significant problems.**

Again, this is one of those good-bad news pieces of data. It reduces the negative impact of divorce on children to a rate much lower than has been typically reported and tells parents that divorce will not permanently mar the lives of most of their children. Nevertheless, 15% of children from divorced families represent millions of struggling lives. As we proceed, I will try to help the reader understand factors that contribute to both the good and bad outcomes.

Hetherington doesn't pull any punches. **The end of a marriage is usually brutally painful to all involved. The first two years is typically characterized as a period of craziness for the whole family, with marked mood swings, abnormal behavioral patterns, and poorer mental and physical health.** For children whose parents have hidden their problems from the children (often from each other), it is especially traumatic and inexplicable, with these children experiencing a greater sense of loss. However, children whose parents had high levels of conflict often found the calmer, more stable single-parent home a relief and not nearly as traumatic. In fact, children from non-divorce, high-conflict homes turned out to have similar outcomes to children from divorced homes, i.e., higher levels of problems while growing up and higher rates of marital problems as young adults.

This clearly suggests that staying together for the children is only beneficial in quietly disengaged marriages. Of course, it is not necessarily beneficial for the parent who wants out, who is more likely to become depressed or develop substance abuse problems if remaining in a loveless marriage.

Preschool children found coping with divorce especially difficult, which makes sense given their greater immaturity and fewer coping skills. They required a custodial parent (nearly always the mother) who was especially stable and engaged. Younger children often regressed in their behavior (wetting/soiling, baby talk, social withdrawal/clinging) and young boys often acted out, becoming what Hetherington called "incompetent

bullies", i.e., being aggressive with peers to get what they want but breaking down in tears if it doesn't work out.

In general, young boys had greater difficulty adjusting to divorce than young girls. To further complicate the issue, mothers appear to have greater difficulty managing

sons who are responding poorly to the divorce. Since boys are acting out more and mothers are especially depleted during those first couple of years, the extra effort required to be effective disciplinarians isn't there. I think a couple of other factors add to this. Mothers often see the difficult son as being "just like his father", making it harder to relate positively to the boy. Also, sons have lost substantial time with their same-sex parent, which often creates a greater sense of loss. This is especially strong for the very active, physical boys who miss the physical aspects of the father-son relationship.

Hetherington reports that consulting with a therapist is helpful for the primary caretaker during this period of greatest turmoil. She notes that what was reported as most helpful was a behavioral approach, focusing on limit-setting and managing stress. Schools also can play a key role, especially for young children, but even for teens. Children need connection to caring adults and a teacher, counselor, nurse, or coach can provide some of that much needed support. Parents need to inform the school about impending divorce and school staff needs to respond by identifying someone who will try to reach out and make that important special connection. Also, there often needs to be some assistance during those first two years to help insure academic success with special sensitivity to the fact that doing homework will often become a much greater challenge during those first two chaotic years. Finally, I have found that school-based support groups for children of divorce are especially helpful in reducing the children's sense of shame and providing coping strategies.

The role of fathers is very important and complex. Fathers tend to become marginalized post-divorce. They lose much of the time they spent around their children. Since men know this (and since most divorces are initiated by women) men are often very opposed to a divorce which means leaving the family home and losing contact with their children. It is becoming increasingly difficult as fathers are much more involved in parenting than they were 20-30 years ago.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that male intimacy is more action-oriented, doing things together, rather than talking about things. With much less time around their children, fathers tend to focus on being "pals" and become less of disciplinarians and often don't spend enough time doing schoolwork with their children. Also, they are often more resentful of the children's outside activities and increasing social needs as they get older because these needs can significantly reduce what is already very limited time. This becomes even more complicated when men move towards remarriage and find themselves having to make difficult choices between their children and their new significant others. (Of course, mothers have similar issues as the usual primary caretakers, but their extra time with the children and their greater relational skills often allow them to find a way to balance these needs more effectively.)

I find that it is especially important for fathers to create a living space that feels like a real second home for the children and to find a way to have one-on-one time with each child (perhaps mid-week visits with one child at a time). Also fathers need to attend school meetings and doctor's appointments and not rely on getting all their information from

mothers (who are not always willing to share the parenting role despite complaints about being left to deal with everything).

After six years:

By this time most of the children are doing well. They are usually more focused on the current issues in their lives than divorce-related issues. By this time that 25% rate of doing poorly has become established. **Much of the outcome is determined by how the parents have adjusted to the divorce, since most of that 25% comes from the 25% of the former spouses who are still hostile and not cooperative.** An equal percentage of parents are actually doing quite well and 20 years later everyone reflects on what an important difference that made for parents and children. The remaining 50% fall into a category Hetherington calls "parallel co-parenting." It's a live and let live relationship where the parents basically ignore each other with minimal communication and, often, very different parenting styles. Interestingly, most children seem to be able to adjust to these differences. I find this to be particularly true when the parents respect those differences and are not openly critical of each other.

In addition to continued parental hostilities, the research indicated that another important factor contributing to poor adjustment after six years is the "parentification" of children. This is when children are asked to take on too much responsibility for caretaking and chores and/or when the parent turns the child into a confidant, needing too much support from the child and sharing too much information about what is happening with divorce-related and household issues. I find this is especially a risk in mother-daughter relationships and is often established during those first two years when the mother's resources are so depleted and there is a daughter of at least pre-teen years.

The importance of the mother-depletion factor is one reason why I so often urge divorcing couples to consider joint-physical custody when that is a possibility or, at the very least, to have a non-adversarial divorce, e.g., using mediation, so there is less hostility to overcome and parenting is more shared, even if not equally.

Another six year finding is the increase in sibling conflict among boys, which may partly reflect girls' greater relational skills, while boys are immersed in socially-reinforced behaviors of bottle-it-up, go-it-alone. The boys, with less access to fathers and less ability to share issues with mothers, end up competing with each other for the reduced parenting resources available to them. Of course, this can add to mothers becoming increasingly frustrated and making positive maternal resources even less available.

Adolescence:

I want to touch on a few of the unique issues for this period of great change in children's lives. Some fascinating research data shows that more girls from divorced families experience early-onset puberty (25%) and even more from remarried families (35%) as compared to girls from married families (18%). The hypothesis Hetherington presents for the divorced family group is one based on evolutionary psychology. This states that girls in hostile environments develop the capacity to reproduce sooner in order to ensure continuation of the species. For the remarried families (where the percentage is nearly double), the "strange male theory" is suggested. This refers to the phenomenon that when a strange male is introduced into a girl's family (stepfather or older stepbrother), it triggers early onset of puberty.

The importance of this data is that these girls are at greater risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. This is especially true in homes where there is an absence of

authoritarian parenting (limit setting that remains sensitive to individual needs and input from the child).

The teens who did well are once again characterized by having strong connections to at least one adult, not necessarily a biological family member. The school is also especially important during these years because of the need to belong and the need to experience success. The teens who struggled during earlier years often exhibit unsuccessful coping in the form of "competence-at-all-costs" (very stressed out teens who fly below the radar until they crash), or the aggressive-insecure children whose adolescence splits into one of two groups, antisocial or depressed-anxious. I feel it is very important to seek mental health services for children who show continued problems beyond the initial two years of expected turmoil and, especially for those who show signs of struggle during adolescence.

After twenty years:

Breaking new ground with this data, since many of the original group are now married adults, Hetherington offers some helpful insights. **Eighty percent of the children, as young adults, seem to have become reasonably well-adjusted. Anti-social behavior and drug abuse have declined, although alcohol abuse remains.** A subgroup of girls have actually benefited from the divorce in the sense that the coping skills they learned in dealing with the adversity seems to have contributed to an extraordinary level of achievement.

Family relations seem to have improved, which is why I encourage fathers who felt marginalized during earlier years to stay in connection and they will likely be rewarded with many years of connection to their adult children (which is actually the much longer phase of parenting). Unfortunately, the data showed most young adult children reporting lack of connection to their fathers. But remember this is from the time when fathers were not that involved to begin with. Today's fathers are much more involved and I suspect future long-term data will reflect closer relations when the children are adults.

Growing up in a divorced family does increase the challenge for successful marriages in early adult years. This is especially true when the wife is from a divorced family, since her wounded trust impacts her role as facilitator of connections. However, the limited data from this study suggests the negative impact is not as pervasive as expected.

Furthermore, my experience is that young couples who have experienced divorce are much more sensitive to the risks and are seeking marital counseling much earlier on which gives their marriages a greater chance to succeed. I have been especially struck by the change in the percentage of men initiating counseling and wanting a better quality marriage. This bodes well for diminishing the negative effects of the trauma of divorce on relational commitment.

In closing:

Hetherington states two "bottom-line" messages from her work. First is that there should be a "Nobel Prize for Unsung Heroes", referring to the exceptional courage and resilience exhibited by many mothers who do what is needed under trying circumstances and lead to such high percentages of positive outcomes. Second, she stresses the need to appreciate the flexibility required by everyone involved in order to cope with the challenges of divorce and especially the importance of recognizing that there are many paths to success, so don't keep searching for the "right answer" or feel divorce dooms everyone involved. Just figure out what seems to work best for your family.

