



## Broken Families, Splintered Lives: The Lifelong Harms of Divorce on Children

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**O**N AN AUGUST 2010 SEGMENT OF NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO'S (NPR) "MORNING EDITION," AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD LITTLE GIRL TALKED WITH HER FATHER ABOUT THE IMPACT OF BEING SEPARATED FROM HIM DURING THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF HER LIFE, WHILE HER PARENTS WERE SEPARATED. WHEN HER FATHER, WHO IS NOW REUNITED WITH HER MOTHER, ASKED IF HE OR HER MOTHER HAD EVER DISAPPOINTED HER, THE LITTLE GIRL RESPONDED: "YES. SHE [MOM] ASKED ME IF I WANTED TO MEET MY FATHER, AND I WAS ALREADY FIVE YEARS OLD. AND I WAS LIKE, WONDERING, WHY COULDN'T SHE HAVE SAID THAT BEFORE? ... IF I COULD DO IT NOW, THEN WHY COULDN'T I HAVE DONE IT WHEN I WAS FOUR OR THREE OR ONE?" THEN SHE ADDED, "AND YOU HAD DISAPPOINTED ME, DAD, BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT BEEN IN MY LIFE FOR FIVE YEARS." WHEN ASKED LATER IF HER PARENTS HAD EVER MADE HER PROUD, THE LITTLE GIRL TOLD HER FATHER, "I HAVE BEEN EXTREMELY PROUD OF YOU WHEN YOU CAME TO MY LIFE. THAT WAS A BIG DEAL FOR ME..."<sup>1</sup>

In this little girl's case, her parents reunited, and she now enjoys a strong relationship with her previ-

ously absent father. But the vast majority of children from broken homes will not see their families restored. As this NPR segment reminds us, father-hunger is an increasingly common experience for a growing number of children today who are being raised apart from their fathers—either as a result of divorce or an out-of-wedlock birth. Maggie Gallagher aptly describes this hunger as "an ache in the heart, a gnawing anxiety in the gut...a longing for a man, not a woman, who will care for you, protect you, show you how to survive in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Father-hunger is just one of many negative consequences associated with the breakdown of the family. For children of divorce in particular, these consequences can range from the severe, such as an increased risk of substance abuse, to the subtle, such as being forced to grow up too fast.

Today, close to one million American children experience the divorce of their parents each year, and one-quarter of adults ages 18 to 35 have seen their parents divorce.<sup>3</sup> Nationally, the percentage of children living with two married parents dropped from 85 percent in 1970 to 68 percent in 2007.<sup>4</sup> In North Carolina, an average of 98 divorces occur per

day, and about 34 percent of children are growing up in single parent households, most headed by single mothers.<sup>5</sup>

## For Kids, No “Good” Divorce

The divorce of Mike Meshaw’s parents put a legal end to a high conflict marriage characterized by physical and verbal abuse that occurred often in front of their three young boys. In many ways, their marriage was the type of relationship divorce advocates point to as an argument for easy divorce. However, when Mike looks back on his parents’ marriage, he does not just remember the fighting. While he recognized, even as a child, that “their relationship was volatile and dangerous,” he is quick to add, “But that doesn’t mean we did not have good times together.” Like many children of divorce from high conflict marriages, Mike views his parents’ divorce as a *negative* event. “For me and for my brothers it was devastating—to have our family destroyed, simply by two selfish people who made bad choices,” he says.<sup>6</sup>

According to Dr. Judith Wallerstein, who conducted a 25-year study of the “first generation” of children of divorce, including 32 children from high conflict marriages, “Children in the most abusive families are often very worried about their parents. But unlike adults, they do not conclude that they or their parents would be better off if the parents separated...children in violent marriages want their parents to stay together.”<sup>7</sup> As Wallerstein explains, “divorce is a different experience for adults and children...[Children] want to make the divorce go away and restore the marriage.”<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to the myth that most parental divorces involve high conflict marriages, the vast majority—over two-thirds—do not.<sup>9</sup> According to Wallerstein, most of the young people from divorced families that she has interviewed over the years were from “moderately unhappy marriages that ended in divorce.” The majority said as adults that their parents’ divorce did not make them happier, but ended their childhood.<sup>10</sup>

Another popular myth about divorce is that if parents could simply find a way to have a positive divorce, many of the harms for children could be avoided. In her 2005 book, *Between Two Worlds*, family scholar Elizabeth Marquardt—who is herself a child of divorce—disputes the notion of the “good divorce.”

“While a ‘good divorce’ is better than a bad divorce, it is still not *good*,” Marquardt writes. “For no matter how amicable divorced parents might be, and how much they each love and care for the child, their willingness to do these things does absolutely *nothing* to diminish the radical restructuring of the child’s universe.”<sup>11</sup>

## Initial Reactions

According to a 2002 policy statement on children and divorce published by the American Academy

of Pediatrics (AAP), up to half of children who have experienced the divorce of their parents show “symptomatic responses” during the first year. The AAP identified the following “clinical manifestations” of divorce for children by age, including: irritability, increased crying and sleep problems for infants and children younger than age 3; clinginess, acting out, increased nightmares, and fear of abandonment for four to five year-olds; becoming moody, more aggressive and sometimes uncomfortable with gender identity among school-aged children; and a decrease in self-esteem, anger, confusion, and “the development of premature emotional autonomy” among adolescents, which can lead to substance abuse, depression, and early sexual activity.<sup>12</sup>

## Divorce Stressors

Social scientists have identified a number of “stressors” to child wellbeing that result from parental divorce, including the following four:

- **A loss of contact with one parent, typically the father.**<sup>13</sup> In the majority of single parent households, the custodial parent is the mother.<sup>14</sup> A recent national study found that almost 75 percent of 18 to 35 year olds from divorced families grew up living with their mothers.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, not being married to the mother of his children seems to negatively impact a father’s relationship with those children. “Whatever their marital status, when women bear children, they generally tend to assume responsibility for those children and continue to care for them over the course of their lives...” writes sociologist David Poponoe in his book, *Life Without Father*. “Men tend to view marriage and child rearing as a single package. If their marriage deteriorates, their fathering deteriorates.”<sup>16</sup> According to one study, 10 years after a parental divorce, two-thirds of all children have “virtually no contact with their fathers.”<sup>17</sup>

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- **A decline in living standards.**<sup>18</sup> One study found that families that are not poor prior to a divorce typically experience about a 50 percent drop in their income after a divorce.<sup>19</sup> After his parents' divorce, Mike and his younger brothers moved with their mother from a single-family home in Wilmington, NC, to a low-income housing project on the other side of town. Although his father always contributed financially, Mike's mother struggled to raise her children on a single income.<sup>20</sup> According to an analysis by researchers at the Heritage Foundation, children in single parent divorced families spend about 22 percent of their lives in poverty, compared to seven percent of their lifetime for children in always-married families.<sup>21</sup>
- **Lower quality parent-child relationships.**<sup>22</sup> According to Professor Robert Emery, Director of the Center for Studies of Children, Family and the Law at the University of Virginia, a large number of studies have found that "on average, parents and children have less positive relationships in divorced than in married families."<sup>23</sup> In addition to losing one parent, often dad, from the home, children of divorce also suffer a diminished relationship with their mother, who now bears the heavy burden of a single parent and often begins dating again. As Wallerstein explains, "Parenting cut loose from its moorings in the marital contract is often less stable, more volatile, and less protective of children."<sup>24</sup>
- **Parental conflict after the divorce** often does not improve but escalates as parents argue over custody, child support, and new partners. Divorce did not put an end to the conflict between Mike's parents. While the physical violence ended, the verbal conflict escalated, with

the boys often serving as "messengers" between the former spouses.<sup>25</sup> Emery explains that, "children are often the focus of conflict because they form one of the few remaining ties between former partners; and for some children, post-divorce conflict is notably worse..."<sup>26</sup>

## Negative Social Outcomes

A robust body of research has documented the severe negative social consequences of divorce for children, leading experts in a wide range of fields, including sociology, psychology, medicine, and economics, to conclude that marriage is better for children than all other family forms.<sup>27</sup> After following 131 children of divorce through adulthood, Dr. Wallerstein concluded that, "Children in post-divorce families do not, on the whole, look happier, healthier, or more well adjusted, even if one or both parents are happier."<sup>28</sup>

Compared to children from intact families, children of divorce are: more likely to spend some of their childhood in poverty, are more aggressive toward authority figures, have lower self-esteem, suffer higher rates of depression and mental health difficulties over a lifetime, have more trouble in school (including being more likely to fail a grade or drop out), become sexually active at earlier ages, are more likely to use and abuse drugs and alcohol, are more likely to have an out-of-wedlock birth, and experience less healthy relationships with their peers. They are also more likely to engage in risky sexual activity, experience more psychological problems throughout their life, and cohabit as adults.<sup>29</sup>

According to Wallerstein, the major impact of divorce does not occur in childhood but in adulthood. She found that for adults, the divorce of one's parents negatively influences "personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships, and ability to cope with change."<sup>30</sup> This helps explain why adult children of divorce are one-and-a-half to two times more likely to divorce themselves.<sup>31</sup>

## Hidden Inner Suffering

Of course, not all children of divorce suffer the severe negative consequences typically associated with family breakdown. Some manage to avoid teen pregnancy, finish high school, get college degrees, marry, and have successful careers as adults. Mike Meshaw is a good example of a child of divorce who has succeeded despite being raised in a broken home. He avoided drugs and alcohol, graduated from high school and college, and has had a successful career—first as a teacher and basketball coach—and for the past 10 years as the head pastor of Grace Church in Greenville, North Carolina. Most importantly, he and his wife, Cheryl, have been married for 37 years. He credits his success to coming to faith in Christ as a teenager, and to the mentoring he received from his local church.<sup>32</sup>

Stories like his have led some to claim that divorce does not cause severe or lasting damage to all children. But more recent research has documented the inner struggles faced by many children of divorce—more subtle effects during childhood and adulthood that may not be as obvious on the outside, but are equally as harmful to a child’s well-being. In *Between Two Worlds*, Elizabeth Marquardt focused on the emotional, spiritual and moral struggles of children of divorce based on a national survey of 1,500 adults, which she conducted with sociologist Norval Glenn. “Our study showed that children of divorce, even those who appear to be fine and successful later in life, are much more likely than their peers from intact families to share profound and moving stories of confusion, isolation, and suffering,” Marquardt writes.<sup>33</sup> The study identified a number of inner struggles for children from divorced families, including the following three.

**Divided Selves.** According to Marquardt, divorce creates for children a sense of a divided self because they are literally forced to grow up in two different worlds—always going back and forth between the homes of their divorced parents. Compared to adults from intact families, adult children of divorce were more likely to say they grew up in two families, that they felt “like a different person with each parent,” and that they felt like “outsiders” in their own homes at times.<sup>34</sup>

**Lost Childhood.** Marquardt describes many children of divorce—including herself—as “little adults.” She found that compared to children raised in intact families, children of divorce were more likely to say they grew up too fast, felt marginal in their family, spent a lot of time alone growing up, and often felt as though they had to “protect” one or both parents.<sup>35</sup>

**Less Safe at Home.** Compared to adults from intact families, adults from divorced families had a different understanding of “home,” and were more likely to say they felt *less* emotionally and physically safe growing up.<sup>36</sup> Mike remembers feeling anxious when his mother would leave the boys with a neighbor to go out on a date. “We did not want to go to bed until she came home,” he says, adding that they would often sit in the windowsill watching for her car at night. “We were thinking, Dad’s gone—now when is mom coming home?”<sup>37</sup>

A child’s physical wellbeing is closely associated with the presence of his or her natural father in the home. In general, divorce (and single motherhood in particular) puts children at greater risk for abuse than being raised with their biological married parents. “A major reason for the increase in child abuse is that unrelated men, surrogate fathers, are much more likely to abuse children than are natural fathers, and especially in single parent and step-families,” writes Dr. Poponoe. “Such men have more access to children than ever before. Indeed, an important benefit for having a natural father in the

home is precisely to protect against child abuse.”<sup>38</sup> He cites a San Francisco study of 930 adult women that found that one out of every six women who had a stepfather as a principal figure in her life had been sexually abused by him, compared to one out of every 40 women raised by a biological father.<sup>39</sup>

## The End of A Family

For the vast majority of children of divorce, the demise of their parents’ marriage is a devastating loss that causes lifelong mental, emotional, and physical suffering. This is true, even if the divorce results in later happiness for one or both parents, and even when the children grow up to become successful adults.<sup>40</sup> Divorce, in every sense of the word, is the end of a child’s family. The children may become part of two new families, and feel loved by both parents, but the union that created them and should have nurtured and sustained them through adulthood is now forever shattered. While they may come to understand and accept the reasons for the divorce, children seem to instinctively appreciate the necessity of their parents’ marriage to their own happiness. As noted earlier, even children from high conflict marriages that ended in divorce, such as Mike Meshaw, tend to view their parents’ divorce as a painful loss, rather than a gain.

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Of course, not all married couples *should* stay together, especially in cases of domestic violence. Divorce for some marriages is an evil necessity of a fallen world. But the fact that children from both high conflict and low conflict marriages that ended in divorce want the same thing—their parents to stay married—reveals something very important about marriage from a child’s viewpoint. Every marriage, no matter how imperfect, is critically important to the children born from that sexual union, and every divorce comes with a high price tag. Our responsibility as a society is to acknowledge that children have the greatest stake in the outcome of their parents’ marriage, and to weigh any consideration of a parental divorce against the impact it will have on them. ❖

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