

Divorce & Children

Divorce & Its Effect On Children

The following article is, in my opinion, an excellent expose about this topic. Most of all, this manuscript is non-judgmental, fair-minded and comprehensive. It is not written to tell you what do or not do. It is oriented toward helping couples and professionals reset their intellectual compass so as to think about the *process* of determining the impact of *your specific divorce* given your *specific familial situation*. In short, the issue is not a binary *is-divorce-good-or-bad-for-children*. Read on and you you will get the full picture.

Feel free to leave a blog post at the end of the article, or send [email](#) to me with your comments.

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What Researchers Say About Divorce

Russell Collins, MFT & Laura Collins, JD

Over a million kids will become children of divorce this year. About 20 percent of divorced families seek help for their children—a whopping number when you remember that by most estimates, around 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. If you are a therapist in private practice or you are with an agency, chances are you deal daily with families and kids in one stage or another of a divorce. In a perfect world, you would have at your fingertips all of the knowledge that's been collected about divorce. This knowledge would add immeasurably to your understanding of your clients' problems and the effects—intended and unintended—of your therapeutic interventions.

In reality, few therapists have enough time to sort through the academic journals and extract the useful information. It is unfortunate, because research conducted over the last three or four years has shed new light on the questions that psychotherapy clients most often want answered:

- * Just how damaging is divorce to children?
- * Should we stay together for the kids?
- * How important are fathers in the lives of the children of divorce?
- * How damaging to children is the legal battle over children and money—and is there a better way?

The good news is that much of this research has itself been researched and mined for data that therapists and others can use. Here are a few of the most important findings.

Q: Are our kids going to suffer if we get divorced? Will they be emotionally damaged?

This is the controversy that has been brewing since Judith Wallerstein first published her startling research findings in the 1979 book, *Surviving the Breakup*. Wallerstein found that children really do suffer in a divorce, a fact that she believed had gotten lost in the euphoria of the “divorce revolution” of the 70s. In 2000, Wallerstein reignited the controversy with the publication of *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, a follow-up study that showed children of divorce continue to suffer into adulthood.

On the heels of Wallerstein's book, E. Mavis Hetherington (*For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*) and Constance Ahrons (*We're Still Family*) published studies making the opposite argument: that most grown children of divorce recover quickly and are as emotionally stable as those from continuously married families. Many people, including mental health professionals, have been confused by these findings. How could serious researchers come to such contrary conclusions when studying the same subject?

To make matters worse, the media has exaggerated the controversy and given it a distinctly political slant. To get a straight answer, we turned to Robert Emery, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Center for Children and Families and the Law at the University of Virginia. Emery is the author of the 2004 best-seller, *The Truth About Children and Divorce*, a highly readable and informative guide for parents on the effects of divorce on children. He is also one of the nation's leading researchers on the topic of divorce.

“The truth is in the middle, not at the extremes,” he said, speaking from his office at the University of Virginia. “The media has done a great disservice to families struggling with this issue by presenting it in such black and white terms.” Emery has reviewed virtually all the relevant research—hundreds of studies—from which he has extrapolated a core of verifiable facts. From his viewpoint, it is misleading to talk about divorce being “good” or “bad” for children. He speaks instead about the difference between the pain that almost all of these children feel and the pathology that a minority of them develop. When you look at the data this way, Emery says, much of the controversy melts away.

What emerges instead are useful distinctions that can help light the way for divorcing parents and the therapists who advise them. And, surprisingly, Emery says, proponents on both sides of the argument— even writers as diverse as Wallerstein and Ahrons—are able to get behind these conclusions. The highlights are these:

Divorce is almost always stressful and painful for kids—especially during the first year or two. Therapists should expect this, advise parents to expect it, and help them understand and deal with it as it arises. There is no doubt that some of these children are at risk of developing emotional problems. It's hard to get an exact fix on how many, Emery admits, as the problems sometimes start early, long before the divorce. But most researchers put the number at around twenty to twenty-five percent.

Eighty percent of children from divorced families have no more psychological problems than children from continuously married families. This information is key for both for parents considering divorce and the therapists who advise them. To use the technical jargon, most children are resilient.

Resilience isn't the same as getting through divorce without pain. Nor does it mean that the pain of divorce won't linger long into adulthood. In fact, most adult children of divorce report painful memories. “Forty-eight percent of young people worry about events where their parents will be together, like weddings or a recital,” Emery quotes from the research. “And, about a third of young people who did not live with their dads wondered whether their dads loved them. These painful experiences do not qualify as “pathology” in the sense

that psychotherapists use the word. But this kind of pain is certainly not something that you want for a child.”

Of course, every divorce, and every divorcing family, is different. “For some families, particularly those where conflict is a pervasive and damaging presence, divorce can come as a relief,” Emery acknowledges. “For others, the transition is extremely painful.” Influences affecting a family’s experience of divorce range from socioeconomic variables to parenting competence to the individual personalities involved. The research makes no prediction about how an individual family will fare during divorce. But it does provide signposts to help therapists understand the process as it unfolds, and it provides guidance for getting through it with minimal damage to family members and family relationships.

On the topic of which factors are correlated with resilience versus pathology, Emery is quick to point out that conflict between parents is at the top of the list. He thinks that therapists can be incredibly important in mitigating pathology. “Many couples believe that divorce is the end of their relationship and the end of their troubles with the spouse,” he says of the often naïve expectations of divorcing parents. “But for many divorcing parents, the opposite turns out to be true, because they find themselves battling over, through, and on top of the kids.” Without proper guidance, couples hoping to escape the unhappy, complicated entanglements of married life through divorce may find themselves more deeply entangled than ever. Rather than reducing the damaging conflict in their children’s lives by divorcing, Emery says, these couples increase it.

Q: So, are children damaged by divorce?

The answer from research is that they don’t have to be, and that in many cases, the parents themselves can make the choice for their family by the way they behave toward each other both during and after divorce.

Q: Should we stay together for the kids?

The idea that parents might consider ignoring their difficulties with each other and sticking it out for their children’s sake has enjoyed a resurgence in the last few years. Until recently, most social scientists have taken the position that unhappy parents make unhappy families and unhealthy children. The opposite viewpoint—that family cohesion should take precedence over the personal fulfillment of parents—has been maintained primarily by experts speaking from a religious or politically conservative point of view.

This view has made it difficult to do serious research in this area without being tagged as a member of one faction or the other, according to Paul Amato. Amato chairs the Sociology Department at Penn State and has studied the structure of families for 20 years. Nevertheless, objective research is being done on the issue, with surprisingly specific conclusions. In a 2001 study carried out with fellow researcher, Allan Booth, Amato found that divorce in high-conflict marriages often results in beneficial effects for the children, while the dissolution of a low conflict marriage is more likely to have a negative impact.

Emery, who has reproduced Amato’s findings in more recent research, can think of several reasons why this effect might be so. “A marriage can be ‘good enough’ for the children without being good for the parents,” he points out. To the children, a family may feel like a safe and nurturing place, even as the parents suffer in silence.

These findings may have other implications too—about how parents should responsibly let children in on the less-than-perfect aspects of their marriage. “It may be that parents in low-conflict marriages overprotect their kids,” Emery says. “Maybe these parents need to alert their kids—‘Hey, your mom and I aren’t getting along right now’.” Sharing this information might reduce the traumatic impact of a divorce announcement that comes out of the blue and helps to prepare the children emotionally. “And, if they don’t split up,” Emery adds, “the kids learn you can have conflict and work it out.”

Obviously, these observations don’t provide a clear-cut answer to the question whether parents should stay together for the kids. In fact, they make the decision process a thornier one by adding a new layer of complexity. If children from low-conflict families are better off when parents stay together, then the choice may come to, “Whose happiness am I going to choose?” High-conflict couples confront the opposite dilemma: “Am I hurting my child by trying to save the marriage?”

For therapists too, this scenario further complicates an already difficult question: how do I educate and inform these parents of likely outcomes without pushing them toward one decision or the other? Therapists must be skillful in introducing this news in a way that opens up new levels of responsibility and freedom for clients, rather than the opposite. Done properly, however, it can be tremendously helpful for clients to know what the new findings are, even if it reopens a question many considered closed.

Should we stay together for the kids? The answer from research is this: in a low conflict marriage, you can stay together for the kids with a reasonable hope that your sacrifice will pay off. In a high-conflict marriage, on the other hand, you can separate or divorce with confidence that you have helped your children escape the seriously damaging consequences of fighting between parents. Used wisely, both the questions and the answers can enrich the decision-making process and make your client’s time in therapy more useful and productive.

Q: How important are fathers in the lives of infants and toddlers?

This question is another that has galvanized debate among advocacy groups for the last ten years or so. It is also a question that may come at a therapist from various directions.

A divorcing mom says the father is incompetent and shouldn’t be allowed significant time with their very young children. A discouraged father is considering “dropping out” of his children’s lives. Both parents want the father to spend more time with his children, and want to know the developmentally “correct” way to go about it.

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“Disneyland dad” kind. “Going out for ice cream, seeing movies, or visiting amusement parks may be enjoyable, but these activities do not necessarily contribute in a positive way to children’s development,” Amato says. Instead, children benefit when dads are involved in the activities that significantly effect development.

“Keeping track of how their children are doing in school, talking with their children about right and wrong, helping their children with personal problems, and even disciplining their children when they misbehave.” And, of course, he adds, “fathers need to let their children know that they are loved deeply.”

Research like Amato’s that demonstrates benefits for fathers’ involvement is still being aggressively challenged. Critics see insufficient evidence that multiple caregivers do a better job of raising small children than mothers who raise kids alone. But the tide of opinion may be changing. The research is piling up and having its influence on policymakers and judges figuring out the best course of action when mothers and fathers battle for the custody of their children.

But statements like these have been aggressively challenged by those arguing that there is little evidence that multiple caregivers do a better job of raising small children than mothers who raise kids alone. The issue is highly politically charged, of course, as policymakers and judges try to find the best course of action when mothers and fathers fight over the custody of their children.

To add substance to the debate, Marsha Kline Pruett has just this year completed a five-year study on the effects of divorce on very young children. As she talks, her reasons for focusing her efforts here become apparent. “So many divorcing families have children under six,” she says, “yet the legal system knows so little about young kids.”

Not only that, but an increasing number of unmarried couples now want to share parenting time. “In the absence of empirical evidence, people are making judgments about parenting relying on outdated assumptions.”

One of the effects of this, says Pruett, has been that fathers have often been excluded from the lives of their young children, to the detriment of the very kids the system is trying to protect. “Dad’s often get hit with a double whammy,” she says. “First, they are going through a divorce that they often don’t want, then they are being cut out of their young children’s lives.” This leads to fathers feeling disenfranchised, discouraged, and, in many cases, they quietly slip away. “Fathers of young children are at high risk,” she says, “because they haven’t had time to develop the relationship. Three or four years later, when the system finally grants them significant access to their kids, it’s just too late—for both the fathers and the kids.”

Pruett and her research team at Yale conducted a sizable study of 132 divorced families over a period of one and a half years. Their purpose was to discover the effects of parenting arrangements that allowed young children to spend time in both parents’ homes.

What Pruett discovered was, “by 18 months, not doing overnights is bad for kids, especially for girls.” In fact, Pruett discovered, among the variables she studied, the most important one for young girls was overnights with their dads. “And by age three,” she found, “boys and girls who are not doing overnights look worse socially and cognitively, and in all kinds of other areas, too.”

Psychotherapists working individually with divorcing parents need to understand what’s at stake, Pruett says. “When fathers drop out of children’s lives, they are at risk for a whole host of problems.” But parents are often too busy protecting their own interests to notice. “A young mother or mother-to-be may find the idea of giving up two or three nights a week highly undesirable. A father, conversely, may feel discouraged by the messages he’s getting from the courts or the mother herself.” These situations can easily result in the father being absent. Yet, what the research is telling us is, for most of these very young kids, a missing father can leave a hole in their lives and a damaged link in their development.

This is where the therapist’s role can be pivotal. Looking systemically at the problem rather than addressing just the immediate complaint of a mother or father, the therapist can help his/her client see his/her choices in relation to the whole family picture. And the research can be most helpful in persuading parents to “play ball.” “Kids can’t speak for themselves in this situation,” Pruett laments, “and the parents simply have no idea.”

Sometimes, the therapist is the only one who can see the damage in store for the children and intervene to head it off. A little parent education can go a long way as therapists help guide their clients who are considering divorce. “They need to have a picture of what life is like after divorce,” says Pruett, “and many of these parents turn to their therapist to get some perspective. Moms may imagine their lives as single moms living with their child, not realizing how important—and how likely—it is for the father to be sharing those nights.”

Pruett echoes one of Emery’s points about the therapists’ role in divorce. Much of the value of therapy is helping to paint a realistic picture of life after divorce. The unexpected sources of conflict, like overnights with young children; the unanticipated experience of loneliness when the kids are with their other parent; or, as Emery points out, the fact that parents must go on parenting together although the marriage is over. These are the realities of life after divorce, and therapy clients are often surprisingly blind to them. The therapist who has a full and authoritative grasp of these realities and who can convey them effectively provides a benefit that contributes substantially to their clients’ lives in the years ahead.

Q: Are there ways to get through the legal process without damaging the kids?

Just this year, Emery completed a landmark study on the effects of the legal process on children in divorce. Specifically, he asked the question about whether an alternate process—divorce mediation—would make a difference over the years in post-divorce families. The results came as a surprise.

“I was shocked,” he told me. “Twelve years later the mediation—just five or six hours of it—produced huge differences in important variables, like the amount of contact with the father or non-residential mother.” Better parenting, more involvement from non-residential parents, and greater cooperation between parents were all apparent twelve years later. “And how often does five or six hours of anything make that much difference twelve years later?” Emery asks.

“Emery’s new research takes on particular significance in light of what we already know about the effects of parents’ fighting on kids.” Conflict is often the direct cause of kids’ pain and confusion during the time of divorce. The anger and grief that many children of divorce feel as adults can also be linked to conflict. And the psychological scarring and emotional damage that a minority of children suffer as a result of divorce, that, too, is often traceable to conflict. Inter-parental conflict is just bad for kids, and the legal system makes this kind of conflict all but inevitable.

“To put it the way my kids would say it, the choice to mediate is a ‘big duh.’” Emery said. “Should parents carry their conflict into the public arena and put each other down in a courtroom, or sit down in private and work out this intensely personal matter?”

As dramatic as they are, Emery’s conclusions about the superiority of divorce mediation over the litigation route come as no surprise to those in the field. Judges, therapists and lawmakers watching the pernicious effects of court battles on families have, for years, been scratching their heads at its ineffectiveness and inappropriateness for dissolving marriages.

Adding it up—The good news and the bad for divorcing parents:

* Most children make it through divorce without damage—and some children even gain a little resiliency in the process.

* The number of children who suffer lasting damage is relatively small—twenty to twenty-five percent.

* The choices parents make—about fighting and about fathers staying involved, specifically— can spell the difference between pathology and resiliency in their children.

* Parents can stay together to the benefit of their children. Or, they can choose to separate to spare them from damaging conflict.

* Mediation works far better than the court system in helping parents get through divorce without damaging their children.

These are all things we didn’t know with certainty just a few short years ago. But this is what the new research is telling us. Therapists who know and understand these findings are guiding their clients more effectively through the turbulent waters of divorce, providing significant benefit to their clients, their client’s families, and their communities.

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