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CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

NAVIGATING MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE



Image of distressed couple.

IS DIVORCE TO BLAME?

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Since the surge of divorce in the United States (Pew Research Center 2015), there has been long-standing debate about the costs and benefits of marriage and divorce. Growing numbers of rearranged families have led researchers and public officials to investigate whether these life changes are beneficial, harmful, or insignificant to those involved. Particularly, a lot of attention has been paid to the wellbeing of children after parents go their separate ways. Although years of accumulated research illustrates some of the effects of marriage and divorce, new and refined studies demonstrate that divorce is less threatening than previously thought. In fact, the majority of children who experience divorce learn to adapt to their new life circumstances, showing zero signs of long-term setbacks in social and emotional development (Rutter 333; Cowan and Cowan 361), which is unlike previous findings that frames divorce as crippling and debilitating to children's wellbeing.

Put simply, “divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being, and forces others on a downward trajectory from which they might never recover fully” (361). Current research shows that 20-25 percent of children from divorced families struggle to overcome problems pertaining to divorce, whereas 75-80 percent perfectly adjust to these changes (333;361). It is said that most children face difficulties in the beginning stages of divorce but adverse effects are known to disappear over time, harming only a portion of these children way into adulthood. Some of the more common problems include academic, emotional, and social impediments which soon develop into more healthy mechanisms as children age.

Don't Divorce Me! Kids' Rules for Parents on Divorce (2012) gives an insider view of children's experiences with divorce. In this documentary, director Amy Schatz shares the heart-tugging stories of children who navigated uncharted waters after their parents separated unexpectedly. As they recall upon their personal experiences, children express complex yet moving realities. In general, all children faced the immediate harms of divorce, but only a few continued to suffer from these problems years after the event. The majority explained that divorce is harsh in the beginning—being that they had to navigate new issues such as parent rivalry, conflict, limited communication, unequal shared custody, and long-distance traveling—, but recovery ensued as they acclimated to their new normal. However, this was not always the case. For some children, divorce was a life-altering event that followed them throughout their lives. Unlike the trajectory of many, a minority of children found themselves needing additional support, such as therapy, because resentment and anger lingered.



As new research outlines, divorce is not to blame for children's poor outcome. Emerging studies suggests that pre- and post-disruption (meaning, the events that occur before and after a divorce) can exacerbate certain reactions more than others (333). It has also been noted that other marital aspects affect how children adjust to divorce. Factors like parents' mental health, problem-solving strategies, conflict/emotion management, intergenerational learned behaviors, and social support impact the wellbeing of children (329; 367). In sum, divorce may lack some of the benefits of marriage, but divorce alone is not always responsible for the negative experiences of children. If anything, children have proven to be quite resilient in the face of adversity.

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