

How Much Does Divorce Affect Kids?

By MICHAEL S. JAMES

A middle-aged couple from suburban Chicago recently walked into psychologist M. David Royko's office armed with books on divorce.

The wife, who wanted a divorce, cited a newly released book that says conventional wisdom has overstated divorce's long-term negative consequences.

The husband, who wanted to reconcile for the sake of their two school-aged children, stood by a 2000 book that paints a darker picture of divorce's legacy — children who may appear normal, but who have difficulty creating and maintaining intimate relationships.

Royko, director of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Ill., Marriage and Family Counseling Service, has seen a lot of that lately. Divorcing spouses have always used research as ammunition, he says, but lately the debates have focused on these two books: E. Mavis Hetherington's 2002 *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* and Judith Wallerstein's 2000 *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study*.

"If you've got two parents coming in through mediation, you've got two parents armed," he said.

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Two Theories; High Stakes

The publication of Hetherington's book in January has sparked debate about the true extent of divorce's psychological damage, particularly on kids.

The stakes are high, because divorcing families have included more than a million children every year from 1972 to 1990, the most recent year for which such a figure is available, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Wallerstein estimates that divorced parents raised a quarter of the current adult population between ages 18 and 34.

Most psychologists, including Hetherington and Wallerstein, agree children are initially hard hit by divorce, with some variation based upon age of the kids, and often have higher rates of divorce and other difficulties.

But the two books — each based on decades of interviews and studies of dozens of middle-class, divorced families and their kids, as well as intact families and theirs — differ on the percentage, types and depth of the problems.



long-term negative impact on the lives and psyches of the kids, though some disagreed.

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Hetherington: Negative Effects Exaggerated

Hetherington, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, found up to 25 percent of children with divorced parents "have serious social, emotional or psychological problems" in the long term, compared to 10 percent of children from intact families.

For many kids, however, she found widespread initial wounds right after the divorce can be overcome — with a small minority, more often girls, ultimately even emerging from their parents' divorce stronger and more self-reliant than kids from intact families.

"Negative long-term effects have been exaggerated to the point where we now have created a self-fulfilling prophecy," wrote Hetherington and the co-author of her book, John Kelly, a journalist. "At the end of my study, a fair number of my adult children of divorce described themselves as permanently 'scarred.'"

"Objective assessments of these 'victims' told a different story," Hetherington and Kelly wrote. "Although they looked back on their parents' breakup as a painful experience, most were successfully going about the tasks of young adulthood: establishing careers, creating intimate relationships, building meaningful lives for themselves."

Wallerstein studied fewer families than Hetherington, but says she dug deeper into the thoughts and anxieties of the types of children Hetherington found functioning normally.

Wallerstein, founder of the Center for the Family in Transition in Corte Madera, Calif., who believes her findings don't conflict with Hetherington's, says just because children of divorce don't show measurable psychological disorders doesn't mean they're like children from intact families.

"She's going by psychiatric symptoms; I'm asking how they feel," Wallerstein said. "You can't measure love. The things that Mavis has studied, she can measure."

Some psychologists say children of divorce lack positive relationship role models because of their parents' problems, a notion Wallerstein endorses.

"There's a sense in these young people as adults that they are in an alien world, that they want love, that they want commitment and that they are unprepared," said Wallerstein, who co-wrote her book with Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee.

"They're very good about work because they learn at a very early age you have to be independent," she said. "But they're very troubled about their relationships, and they have a very hard time, and they blame their parents, and this affects the whole fabric of American society."

affects all kids involved but things can be done to address potential problems, and children of divorce are far from doomed.

"We have to continue to do this [counseling] work regardless of which camp of the researchers we think is more accurate," she said. "It is very true that the better the parents can do their divorce, the better they can establish a businesslike relationship that is free of blame and criticism of the other parent ... [the more easily] the children can enjoy an improved life after divorce."

Still, when counseling young adults with relationship issues, she often uncovers "grief issues related to the separation and divorce" of their own parents at the root of "a cycle of failure of relationships."

"I've developed the view over time that every child is affected because it's a profound difference in the way you live your life and a profound difference in the way you view adults," she said.

Michael Goldberg, a Harvard Medical School instructor and director of Child and Family Psychological Services, a private mental health practice in Norwood, Mass., says the depth of recent research has allowed closer examination of factors — such as conflict, economic support, ex-spouses' post-divorce relations, and divorced parents' relationships with their kids — that may make the biggest differences in psychological health.

"The debate is no longer whether divorce is good or bad for kids," said Goldberg, a psychologist. "It's more looking at what are the aspects of divorce that are good or bad."

parents can have a lot to do with what that effect is."

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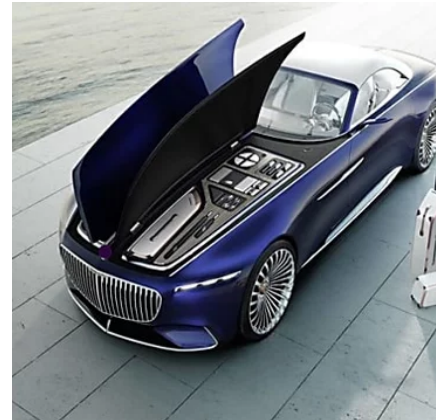
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