

Kids, Parents Can Make Best of Divorce

Though painful, divorce can be an 'opportunity' for a new, better life

Negatives overstated, in-depth study says

By Karen S. Peterson
USA TODAY

Charlottesville, Va. – A new, book-length study to be published this month says that the negative impact of divorce on both children and parents has been exaggerated and that only about one-fifth of youngsters experience any long-term damage after their parents break up.

One of the most comprehensive studies of divorce to date, the research will bring balm to the souls of parents who have chosen to end their marriages. It probably also will incense those who see divorce as undermining American society.

After studying almost 1,400 families and more than 2,500 children – some of them for three decades – trailblazing researcher E. Mavis Hetherington finds that about 75% to 80% of children from divorced homes are “coping reasonably well and functioning in the normal range.” Eventually they are able to adapt to their new lives.

Hetherington: Author/researcher studied 1,400 families and 2,500 children for divorce report.

About 70% of their parents are leading lives that range from “good enough” – the divorce was “like a speed bump in the road” – to “enhanced,” living lives better than those they had before the divorce.

About 70% of kids in step-families are “pretty happy,” Hetherington says. And 40% of couples in stepfamilies were able to build “stable, reasonably satisfying marriages.”

Critics will cite a laundry list of studies with contrary findings, including the work of Judith Wallerstein. She is the high-profile, controversial

researcher whose dire 1989 findings that children basically never get over divorce caught the public's attention and helped spark a national debate.

Hetherington is publishing her relatively positive findings in *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (Norton, \$26.95), out Jan. 21. Her co-author is journalist John Kelly. The summation of her life's work is long awaited by polarized academics – and aimed at clearing up confusion among moms and dads worried about divorce.

Much of the current writing about divorce, both popular and academic, “has exaggerated its negative effects and ignored its sometimes considerable positive effects,” Hetherington writes.

Ending a marriage, she says, “is an experience that for most people is challenging and painful. But it is also a window of opportunity to build a new and better life.”

The Gold Standard of Research

Hetherington, whose research methods are regarded by her peers as the gold standard, is professor emeritus in the department of psychology at the University of Virginia. She writes:

- The vast majority of children within two years after their parents' divorce “are beginning to function reasonably well again.”
- Most young adults from divorced families were “behaving the way young adults were supposed to behave, choosing careers, developing permanent relationships, ably going about the central tasks of young adulthood.”
- For every young adult from a divorced family that is having social, emotional or psychological

problems, four others are functioning well. Most divorced women “manage to provide the support, sensitivity and engagement their children need for normal development.” Single moms “deserve a prize” for their efforts, she says. “Many of them are real heroes.”

- Women tend to come out of divorce better than men, despite the financial dilemmas many experience. “A subset of our women and girls turned out to be more competent, able people than if they had stayed in unhappy family situations.”

Hetherington’s new book comes at a pivotal time. The divorce rate actually has dropped slightly in the 1990’s from a high of more than 50% of new marriages ending in divorce to about 43% currently. But for most experts, the numbers still are unacceptably high.

Just how much damage divorce does to kids is a real hot-button topic. Hetherington’s findings contradict those of several renowned experts who say the children are at risk for a variety of difficulties, including dropping out of school, emotional problems, substance abuse, having babies out of wedlock and having their own marriages end in divorce.

Over the past decade, researchers highlighting such results have dominated the public deliberations, leading some state legislatures to debate changes in divorce laws.

Hetherington now steps in, hoping to alter the national dialogue. The country has been so caught up in believing that the long-term effects of divorce are inevitably harmful that it is almost becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, Hetherington says.

“I think it is really important to emphasize that most do cope and go on to have a reasonably happy or sometimes very happy life,” she says.

She adds a caveat. To ensure an emotionally healthy youngster, “there must be a competent, caring parent,” she says.

The 75-year-old developmental psychologist – she volunteers her age – does have credentials. She invented many of the in-depth tools now commonly used to measure well-being in families, producing a nuanced look at what happens in divorce. And she has a control group of intact families for much of her work, so she can make comparisons with the normal troubles non-divorced families encounter.

That control group, the size of her sample, the length of time she has gathered data and the thoroughness of her work awe her peers. “She is the leading social scientist who studies the effects of divorce on children,” says Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. “She was the pioneer in her field, and we have all followed in her wake. She was the first serious researcher to do excellent, rigorous studies of children and families. Everyone has read her work and learned from it.”

Problems children face

When comparing divorced families with a control group of intact families, University of Virginia professor E. Mavis Hetherington found:

- 25% of children from divorced families have serious social, emotional or psychological problems;
- 10% from intact families do.
- 75% to 80% of children in divorced families are able to adapt and become reasonably well adjusted
- 20% to 25% are troubled – depressed, impulsive, irresponsible, or anti-social.
- 20% of children in stepfamilies are troubled
- 10% in intact families have trouble with depression or anti-social behavior.
- 70% of children in divorced families feel close to their biological moms
- 80% in intact families do.
- 70% of young adults from divorced families say divorce is acceptable even if children are present
- 40% from intact families do.

Source: For Better or Worse: Divorce Reconsidered

Family historian Stephanie Coontz, co-chairman of the Council, on Contemporary Families, says Hetherington is “the perfectly balanced scholar. She is absolutely respected among her peers. Her advice is as good as you are going to get.”

Seated in her 100-year-old home, a renovated schoolhouse overlooking the Blue Ridge mountains. Hetherington elaborates on her incendiary goal: altering the national debate. Her voice takes on a slightly sharp edge. She does not believe that divorce is all right. "I am saying it is painful," she says.

Types of ex-spouses

Twenty years after their divorces, ex-spouses fall into a number of categories, says University of Virginia divorce expert E. Mavis Hetherington:

- **Enhanced**, 20%. Mostly successful at work, socially and as parents; often in new marriages.
- **Competent loners**, 10%. More emotionally self-sustaining than enhanced ex-spouses, but otherwise look like them. Don't need lifetime companion.
- **Good enoughs**, 40%. Divorce caused tumult but didn't make lasting impression, good or bad.
- **Defeated**, 10%. Succumbed to depression, substance abuse, purposelessness.
- **Seekers or libertines**, 20%. Seekers (often insecure men) want to remarry quickly. Libertines want life in fast lane, casual sex and no rules.

But it is also true that the disastrous results of splitting up have been exaggerated for both children and parents. A lot of people believe that "if you have gone through a divorce, you are inflicting a terminal disease on your children," she says.

Few criticize Hetherington outright. But even as many tip their hats to her, the disapproving already are lining up.

David Blankenhorn, one skeptic, is the author of *Fatherless America* and a leader of the growing "marriage movement," which seeks to reduce the number of marriages that end in divorce.

Hetherington's book will stoke "a sort of backlash," Blankenhorn says. "We have made so much progress in the last 10 years in what I would call realism about divorce. Reputable scholars have led a trend away from a kind of 'happy talk' approach to divorce. Even the title of her book says something: that we are reconsidering divorce, the fact that divorce is harmful to children." He takes issue with those like Hetherington who believe, he

says, that "we shouldn't worry so much" or that "the kids will be fine."

Wallerstein, a rival doyenne of family research, is ready to do battle with Hetherington. In 1989 Wallerstein's *Second Chances* became a surprise best seller. While some academics faulted the small size of her sample (about 60 families), some of her research methods and her sweeping generalizations, the public noticed her results. Parents worried about what the children of divorce said, that while splitting up might be seen as a second chance for happiness by adults, it is not by their kids.

The problems of divorce

Wallerstein found that children of divorce lack role models for healthy marriages, have a longer adolescence as they help heal wounded parents, have less of a chance at college, greater substance-abuse problems, less competence in social relationships and often difficulty bonding in stepfamilies.

Wallerstein's follow-up in 2000, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, continued her troubling findings. A parental split is not something that children get over, she emphasizes, and in fact the consequences follow them throughout their adult lives.

Wallerstein sees statistics in Hetherington's book as representing a glass half-empty, not half-full. Hetherington, for example, found that 40% of adults who divorce are living "good enough" lives and have the same problems they had before their divorces, though they are now with different partners.

Having the same problems is not progress, Wallerstein says, adding, "That is not a finding to go dancing about."

And while Hetherington's findings may initially seem positive, many of her comments about the children themselves could have come from Wallerstein's own writings. Wallerstein says. "She could be quoting me. She finds the two most

common themes with the young men and women in divorced families involve trust and safety. She writes that the children display a reluctance to commit and an uncertainty in relationships." Linda Waite, sociologist at the University of Chicago and co-author of *The Case for Marriage*, questions one of Hetherington's key findings, that perhaps the surest way for a child of divorce to avoid a divorce himself is to marry someone from an intact family. "Then what she is really saying is that if you are a divorced person, nobody should marry your child," Waite says.

When one goes deeper into Hetherington's wide-ranging book, some alarming findings do emerge:

- 70% of young people from divorced families see divorce as an acceptable solution, even if children are present. Marriage is forever "if things work out." Only 40% from intact families do.
- Fewer than 20% of young adult stepchildren feel close to their stepmoms. The divorce rate in remarriages is greater than those in first marriages, frequently because the stepmother is unpopular: She is often caught in the middle, expected to be nurturers of sometimes difficult and suspicious children.
- Men and boys adjust emotionally less well after a divorce in the family than women and girls. Divorced men do poorly alone and remarry quickly, while boys become challenges to the single moms they tend to live with, often losing touch with dads.

Still, most children of divorce make it through. Rather than thinking about "the inevitability of any one kind of outcome of divorce," Hetherington hopes readers think about the "diversity of outcomes. What is striking is that we go from those who are totally defeated, mired in depression and poverty, to these ebullient, happy, satisfied people making wonderful contributions to their families and society."

Hetherington's interest in family goes back in part to her father: She was raised with her folks in British Columbia, Canada. "I have always been

interested in fathers; My own played such an important role in my life." All her life, she says, he has told her to "go for it."

She has – writing or editing 15 books collecting a dozen distinguished science awards, lecturing and teaching classes. She never uses notes in a lecture. "I have something of a photographic memory," she says.

Not 'pro-divorce'

Hetherington has been married 46 years and has three grown sons and three grandchildren. Neither she nor her sons have ever been divorced.

And she would like to make one thing perfectly clear. "The last thing I want to do is sound like I am recommending divorce. I am not pro-divorce. I think people should work harder on their marriages and be better prepared when they go in and more willing to weather out the rough spots and support each other. "

But divorce, she says, "is a legitimate decision. If children are in marriages with parents who are contemptuous of each other, not even with overt conflict, but just sneering and subtle putdowns that erode the partner's self-esteem, that is very bad for kids."

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