

Unhappily Ever After

*Why a bad marriage may be better for your children than a good divorce.
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STAYING together for the sake of the kids. It's such an outdated notion. What was once seen as an act of sacrifice and moral strength is today dismissed as misguided masochism. Bitter tight-lipped martyrs living in hell with their equally miserable kids. Who needs it?

For the past two or three decades, we have embraced a different approach to the issue of children and marriage breakdown: namely, that divorce is better for kids than growing up with parents in a troubled marriage. Parents who take care of themselves will be best able to take care of their children.

This comforting fiction has allowed parents to justify their decision to break up families and go their separate ways. And in doing so they have found support from marriage counsellors and social scientists keen to assure them that the happiness of parents is the key determinant of children's welfare.

It is a notion that has met with wide public support, as social institutions joined in the joyful celebration of family diversity. Who could forget the Year of the Family, when we witnessed strenuous efforts to downplay any advantage traditional families could offer children? The idea of family has become all-embracing, with all relationships, all living arrangements, held as equally valuable.

But now the ground is shifting. In the past few years the evidence has become overwhelming that divorce is having detrimental effects on the lives of many Australian children. Abundant research, here and abroad, demonstrates that the intact two-parent family offers children distinct and life-lasting advantages over single-parent and blended families.

Last year, Dr Bryan Rodgers of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Centre at the Australian National University published a comprehensive analysis of all the main local research – 25 studies in all – on the impact of divorce on children. The Australian findings confirmed overseas trends showing children of divorce are twice as likely to experience problems as those whose parents stay in a reasonably satisfactory intact marriage. Younger children are more likely to experience mental health problems, have poorer self-control and lower reading skills. Teenagers are more at risk of psychiatric symptoms, impulsiveness, early sexual activity, substance abuse, delinquency and poor educational achievement.

Just this week, a report from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research showed a clear link between juvenile crime and single-parent families. According to this report, new juvenile offenders are being created at a rate of 99 a week in the State, largely as a result of the neglect of children in such families.

And the impact of divorce on children carries through into adulthood, as shown by the Canadian sociologist Paul Amato, whose research includes Australian data. Offspring from divorced families, compared with those from two-parent families, enter adulthood with less education, earn less money, have poorer quality marriages, are more likely to divorce and have lower levels of wellbeing. Yes, it's true that not all children will show these effects. Obviously, many children survive their parents' divorce unscathed and go on to live successful, fulfilling lives. There is even evidence

that growing up in a single-parent family sometimes enhances children's life skills, helping them become more responsible and self-sufficient.

But those who flourish do so against the odds, because a great many of them grow up in poverty. Contributing to the disadvantage suffered by children of divorce is the fact that most spend long periods living in deprived circumstances with impoverished sole parents.

Marriage break-up and separation are the main reason for a recent dramatic increase in the number of Australian children living in poverty. Research just published by Bob Birrell and Virginia Rapson of the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University has shown an astonishing 43 per cent of Australian children live in poor families receiving welfare, an 11 per cent increase from five years ago.

Contrary to common assumptions, unemployment is not the main cause of the deprived circumstances of these children. Family break-up is a far more important factor, with twice as many children living in families dependent on the sole-parent pension than with families receiving unemployment benefits.

Professor Birrell says he is surprised that so many recent reports on poverty fail to highlight family break-up as the main cause of child poverty. "There's clearly a reluctance to identify family breakdown as a factor," he says. "Many of the analysts are anxious that women should be able to pursue their lives without being bound to difficult marriages. Therefore it's not surprising they are reluctant to look at family breakdown as a major factor in the growth of poor families."

The link between poverty and disadvantage for children is well documented. The collapse of marriage leaves most people poorer. But the change in living standards is most dramatic with children of middle-class families who are deprived of the benefits of the enormous sacrifices – from working overtime to taking a second job – that married fathers routinely make for their children but which divorced fathers seldom do.

There is no doubt the irresponsibility of many divorced men who flee their obligations, or pay the absolute minimum, contributes to the hardship. But the end result is lost opportunities and lesser lives for many children.

John Embling, from the Melbourne-based Families in Distress Foundation, has spent 30 years trying to help children cope with the chaos and disadvantage that flow from family disintegration. The notion of an intact family is alien to many of the children he now sees, growing up with desperate debt-ridden young mothers, themselves victims of fragmented homes.

"The children are in diabolical need. I could take you into these households and show you what it's like for kids to try to cope when Mum's on drugs or drink, there's no bloke around worth a cracker and primary school kids have to get themselves up and off to school. And the kids can't begin to deal with education if their home situation is so terribly deprived and in turmoil all the time."

Embling has attracted criticism for speaking out about the dire consequences for children of society's relaxed attitude to divorce, which he sees as linked to the narcissism of the 1960s: "The middle-class progressive agenda in the '60s was about adults following their own flag. They really weren't interested in the children. It was as if kids were dandelions that would just grow by themselves. You didn't have to be responsible for them."

Embling makes the point that many people running Australia's social institutions have their own reasons for choosing to keep their heads in the sand. "A lot of the people who set the social agenda and work in the media in this country are middle-class intellectuals living the lifestyles we are talking about. They do not want to address these issues because it makes them personally uncomfortable."

The Families in Distress Foundation, like other social welfare organisations, daily confronts the very worst consequences of family fragmentation. But even in more affluent circumstances, parents who make the decision to divorce are putting their youngsters' welfare in jeopardy. For many of these children, the impact of that decision will be the greatest setback they will face in their young lives. THE reality of divorce – now so well researched and documented – is steadily undermining sources of comfort for parents considering a marriage break-up.

For a start, we can no longer console ourselves that children are better removed from acrimonious marriages. The issue of children's exposure to parental conflict has turned out to be a complex affair. Yes, it is certainly true that serious family conflict is very damaging to children. The research shows clearly that a child witnessing physical violence between parents or caught between warring adults is likely to suffer emotional damage.

But there is now a body of research teasing out the level of marital conflict likely to cause harm to children and comparing this with the impact of divorce. For instance, the Washington researchers James Peterson and Nicholas Zill compared the level of marital conflict with children's emotional health at two points five years apart, and found children whose parents were divorced, separated or remarried were twice as likely to need psychological help as children whose parents had stayed in a marriage with minor or moderate conflict.

Even children whose married parents had high-conflict marriages at the start of the survey did better than children whose parents broke up. The only group of children showing more problems than the divorced group were children whose married parents reported high conflict at both points in the survey. So before divorce can even begin to look like a better option for kids, the marital conflict that leads to it must be intense and sustained. In these circumstances, divorce may certainly benefit the children – but only if the separation leads to less conflict.

And there's the rub. The common assumption is that to end marital conflict, all that's needed is to end the marriage. But, as we all know, it doesn't work that way. Divorce doesn't always end the conflict – in fact it often ups the ante. Haven't we all witnessed divorcing couples whose well-hidden private misery degenerates into name-calling, raised voices, uncharacteristic acts of viciousness and violence? Divorce frequently intensifies conflict between parents, with the more violent relationships being particularly at risk of dangerous escalation. We are all too familiar with the tragic stories of murders and acts of horrific violence in separated families, usually where there has been a history of violence before the divorce.

And sadly, married couples who never before resorted to physical abuse sometimes let loose after divorce. In Judith Wallerstein's influential study of American middle-class divorced parents, more than three-quarters of the children had never seen physical violence between their parents before the divorce, but more than half witnessed it after the couple separated.

The point is, for all their discontents, most unhappy couples do a pretty good job shielding their children from their misery. There has been a series of overseas studies showing most children remembered their parents' marriage as happy before the divorce and up to half had no memories of conflict. But after the divorce, the conflict often escalates and now children, instead of simply

witnessing it from the sidelines, are centre stage. Children often become the prime focus in battles between hostile divorced parents, caught up in bitter arguments over arrangements for their care.

The low-conflict good divorce seems a rarity, at least according to the overseas research. The Californian sociologist Constance Ahrons conducted a series of studies analysing the relationships of divorced couples. She found only 12 per cent of the couples had low-conflict relationships. Five years later, a third of these had degenerated into open conflict, often when one or both ex-partners remarried.

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) shows a less bleak picture, with just over half of parents reporting intense or moderate conflict in the years following separation but diminishing substantially over the next five-year period. Of course, often the reduction in conflict results from fathers dropping out of the scene altogether – by five years about half of fathers see their children rarely, if at all.

The most recent Australian research to examine these issues is the Western Australian Child Health survey, which studied the mental health of 2,737 children from 1,462 families. The survey found family structure to be an important factor in predicting the mental health of children. Original families where the parental relationship was poor still resulted in fewer children with mental health problems than single-parent or blended families.

The West Australian research showed very clearly that parental remarriage results in only small improvements in children's welfare. Compared with children in original families, children in blended families were 2.4 times more likely to have a mental health problem. Children in single-parent families were 2.5 times more at risk.

That has turned another of the great assumptions about divorce on its head. The optimistic notion was that ending all these unhappy marriages would provide parents with opportunities for a new start to life, enabling children to benefit from the restored nuclear family and increased marital bliss. The true picture has turned out to be far more complex. Yes, it's certainly true most people repartner after divorce. Almost half the children whose parents divorce have a stepfather within six years. But these new marriages break down at a higher rate than original marriages. In fact, many divorced parents live in even less permanent de facto relationships, increasing the chances of further change and disruption in children's lives.

The bulk of the Australian research supports overseas data suggesting that blended families can actually increase some risks for children, particularly the likelihood they will leave school and home earlier. Even more worrying is the dramatic increase in child sexual and physical abuse when children live with adults who aren't their natural parents. Sadly divorce, which is often portrayed as a protection against domestic violence, is sometimes a contributing cause.

So what has emerged is a clear conflict between the interests of children and those of adults. It is proving impossible to uphold the freedom of adults to pursue happiness in private relationships and at the same time respond to the needs of children for stability and security.

The issue must be faced. Our society's unwillingness to acknowledge the truth of what is happening to children leaves many vulnerable to the same plight. Some of the blame for the continuing distortion rests with social scientists determined to promote children as resilient and eternally adaptable.

Two years ago psychologists at Macquarie University trumpeted the news that their 10-year study had shown no difference in the emotional health of children from divorced children and intact families. Australian children seemed to have escaped the perils afflicting children of divorce elsewhere, they claimed. But as Bryan Rodgers from the ANU argued in articles published in the journal *Australian Psychologist* late last year, the Macquarie study was flawed and the number of children studied far too small to draw conclusions that run counter to the vast bulk of other published Australian research. It could be argued similar problems apply to the small, selective sample used in Kate Funder's research from the AIFS, which last year claimed proof of a "triumph of adaptability after divorce". Overseas studies "grossly overestimated the gloom and doom", Funder pronounced to an enthusiastic media reception.

The founding director of the AIFS, Don Edgar, has long expressed his concern about the role such research has played in distorting public debate on the issue of children and divorce: "Of course children are resilient. But that isn't the point. The point is that where you get massive numbers of children being driven into disrupted family lives with lower family resources and lower income, then it has very damaging consequences for them and the wider society."

Edgar believes our society must face up to the damage being done to children. He believes our modern fixation with individual rights to fulfilment must give way to greater recognition of parental obligations. "The great lies need to be exposed . . . Divorce is not simply a private act. It has wide social consequences and the pretence must stop that it is otherwise."

But there's little to encourage parents to rethink while public debate on the issue remains stifled by existing orthodoxy. The other day I spoke to a man who told me he had been considering leaving his family – he was involved with another woman. In the course of our conversation, he mentioned he had been doing a lot of reading about the effects of divorce on children and the ordeal faced by many men who had tried to remain close to their children. He had ultimately decided it was all too worrying. He was staying put.

Not everyone can or should make such a decision. There will be marriages that are simply intolerable, families that are dangerous for children. But in making the decision to break up a marriage, the onus should be on parents to recognise the clear risks to their children and make strenuous efforts to try to minimise the damage.

A great deal is now known about how to do that. Namely: the need to reduce conflict and share parental responsibilities for children's care; the importance of keeping fathers and extended family, particularly grandparents, involved in children's lives; the vital role for fathers in providing generous financial support; the extreme caution that must be exercised about involving children in new adult relationships and the efforts required to avoid further change and disruption.

All of this requires considerable sacrifice and constraints on adult freedom. But isn't that what being a parent is really all about?