Divorce & Children

The Impact of Divorce on Children is Longlasting

A recent post on NextDoor asked, "What is one thing you did for your children that you would wholeheartedly recommend to other parents?" My policy is to almost never post on social media, but I was tempted to reply, "Get married and, if at all possible, stay married."



Of course, the decision to stay married must be made by both parties in the marriage. So, in many situations, a mom or dad finds herself or himself divorced against their will. Still, the normalization of divorce was driven by the oft-repeated myth that "the kids will be fine," that kids need "happy" parents more than they need married ones.

Statistically, however, children of divorce are not fine, and we now have even more evidence to prove it. A new study published at the National Bureau of Economic Research is the largest ever of its kind, tracking over a million children of divorce over fifty years. The results are staggering.

According to researchers Andrew Johnson, Maggie Jones, and Nolan Pope, the average household income immediately after divorce is less than half that of married parents, and never fully recovers. Even as adults, those subjected to an early childhood divorce make less money, about 13% less by their late twenties. According to the authors, this loss is comparable to losing a year of education or growing up in a lower-income neighborhood.

Children of divorce also have a 60% higher risk of teen pregnancy, and a "sharp and persistent" increased risk of childhood mortality. They spend much more time separated from at least one parent, with an average distance of 100 miles between mom and dad. Such children have a 40% higher risk of serving jail time, are half as likely to attend college, and have a 45% higher risk of early death as adults compared with kids whose parents stayed married.

None of these findings are particularly new. Enormous amounts of prior research associates divorce with long-term, negative outcomes for children. What is new here is powerful evidence that divorce causes these negative outcomes. As Grant Bailey noted at The Institute for Family Studies, critics of "scary" divorce statistics typically object that correlation is not causation. In other words, just because children of divorce are statistically poorer, live riskier lives, get less education, and go to jail more often does not mean divorce causes these issues.

This new study puts that question to rest. By comparing not just a million sibling groups (a huge sample size) over fifty years (a clearly sufficient time), but also comparing siblings within families, these authors were able to isolate the effects of divorce, especially on younger children. As expected, divorce proved to be a psychological and social shock to young children in a way nothing else was prior to the divorce.

According to Bailey, we now have convincing evidence that "the negative outcomes associated with divorce are not merely from underlying household issues, but from the act of separation itself." The

authors of the study added, "The magnitude of the effects … underscores how divorce can dramatically reshape children's outcomes" and does so potentially for life.

Of course, there are many children who overcome the trauma of divorce to succeed and thrive in life. And there are also children from intact, wonderful two-parent homes who end up in prison. In other words, statistics are not destiny for individuals, but they do, especially overwhelming ones like these, suggest the inevitable for a society.

In this case, it's clear that the slogan "the kids will be fine" was a lie and should never be believed again. It was, in fact, propaganda and is still proclaimed by those invested in the sexual revolution and its false promises of freedom. Bailey, in fact, points to recent headlines from major media outlets like Slate, The Washington Post, and The New York Times that proclaim dangerous and misleading things such as "Divorce Can Be an Act of Radical Self-Love," and "Women are divorcing—and finally finding happiness," and "In Defense of Divorce," and even "Divorce is a Gift."

It's certainly not a gift to children and never has been. Rather, no-fault divorce has been the most ambitious and widespread example of prioritizing the desires of adults over the rights and wellbeing of children. As children's rights activist Katy Faust often points out, it is a sorry society that asks the weak and helpless to sacrifice for the stronger and more mature.

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It's tragic when a parent is co-opted into a divorce against his or her will. In those cases, families and churches must find ways to step in and add support. There are heroic single moms and dads who have ensured that their children do not become one of these statistics. God bless them. One way the rest of us can help is by learning to collectively value marriage again, for all that it is, especially all that is for kids.

- By: John Stonestreet and Shane Morris of The Colson Center - BreakPoint Daily. 6/5/25