

# When, and Why, Divorce Hurts Kids

by Harry Benson | September 16, 2014 6:30 am

A new study[1] came out earlier this month concluding that whether parents cooperate or not makes little difference to how children cope with divorce. So “Does divorce always damage children?” became the rather loaded topic of discussion for the lunchtime show at a local BBC radio station recently, to which I was asked to contribute.

Let me start by answering the question directly anyway. No. Divorce does not always damage children. In many cases, mainly where there have been high levels of conflict between spouses, both adults and children are better off after the split, especially in the immediate aftermath. It’s easy to see why. When mom and dad regularly have a go at one another, it creates a toxic environment at home. Divorce brings relief from stress.

In many other cases, however, divorce does damage children[2], especially where the parents had relatively low levels of conflict[3]. According to one U.S. study[4], that description applies to about half of divorcing couples. We at the Marriage Foundation have some pending research from a big survey showing that the vast majority of UK couples, married and unmarried, are not at each other’s throats just before they split.

There are two main reasons why the break-up of parents can affect kids negatively.

The first is simply fewer resources. After a split, it’s hard to make the total family income cover the expenses of two households rather than one. The consequence is that many or most lone parents end up dependent on government benefits. Less income, less support, and less time have negative repercussions for children because they affect the parents[5].

The displaced parent—usually the father—now needs to make an extra effort to remain in regular contact with his children. That clearly doesn’t happen in many cases. A reduced level of day-to-day father involvement has a particularly negative effect on teens[6]. Meanwhile, the lone parent at home carries the bulk of the responsibility for day-to-day parenting.

Understandably, single parents can either become more authoritarian or end up overcompensating by being too laissez faire. That doesn’t happen to all lone parents, but it happens enough to know that parenting style is one reason why kids often—but definitely not always—do worse in lone-parent families.

The second is the way children perceive divorce very differently from the parents. To the parents, the reason for the split is obvious. But it may not be to the kids. One day mom and dad are at home, mostly getting on fine, maybe a bit of bickering or a bit of a sour atmosphere, but not the end of the world. The next day they have split up. What on earth happened? Was it me? Or is that how relationships are? They just go pop for no apparent reason? That kind of thinking can sabotage the way children think about relationships when they become adults themselves.

When parents then get along fine after the divorce, it can become even more confusing for the children. Why on earth couldn’t you make it work, parents? That’s why the whole idea of cooperative parenting makes so little difference to children[7]. It’s how they perceive the divorce that matters, not how the parents think they perceive it.

The superb radio interviewer I spoke with—Caroline Martin[8] at BBC West Midlands, who has given me permission to repeat this—had a fascinating example of both ends of this experience. She told how she was fifteen when her own parents split up. After an idyllic upbringing, her parents split, and their subsequent acrimony came as a terrible shock to her. She vowed never to bring this on her own children. Alas, as an adult, her own marriage fell apart. She tried to compensate for the awfulness of her parents' post-divorce ill-will by going out of her way to stay friends with her ex-husband, her children's father. With remarkable honesty, she told how it ended up confusing her own children. You can get on OK now, they were thinking. Why not before?

There are no easy answers to this. But I have two concluding thoughts.

If you are currently struggling in your own relationship and wonder what to do, please read my letter to struggling couples[9]. It's full of practical advice about how there is always hope even when it seems so far away. I know. I've been on the brink myself.

If you have split up, then don't assume that getting along with your ex will have the positive effect on your children that it probably does for you. Your children may well see the split very differently than you do. And that's OK. The biggest gift you can give them is to acknowledge their hurt.

*Harry Benson is Communications Director of the UK-based Marriage Foundation[10]. An earlier version of this post appeared on the Marriage Foundation blog[11].*

#### **Endnotes:**

1. A new study: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/fare.12086/abstract>
2. divorce does damage children: <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145704>
3. parents had relatively low levels of conflict: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00197.x/abstract>
4. one U.S. study: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00396.x/abstract>
5. they affect the parents: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0006/papers/esr2011.pdf>
6. particularly negative effect on teens: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00239.x/abstract>
7. cooperative parenting makes so little difference to children: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00666.x/abstract>
8. Caroline Martin: <https://twitter.com/cazzatalkmartin>
9. please read my letter to struggling couples: <http://www.marriagefoundation.org.uk/Web/Content/Default.aspx?Content=447>
10. *Marriage Foundation*: <http://www.marriagefoundation.org.uk/Web/>
11. *Marriage Foundation blog*: <http://marriagefoundationblog.wordpress.com/blog/>

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