



THEM BEFORE US

Children's Rights Before Adult Desires

DIVORCE

“Divorce” is another term for the death of a family. Divorce introduces instability, confusion, and questions of parental loyalty into the already complex nature of childhood. With it often comes the death of a child's feelings of safety and security; it's the end of one home, of love shared by the two people the child loves most, and of time spent with both parents daily.

Divorce impacts children for life. Children of failed marriages become adults who are “less well educated, have lower family incomes, marry earlier but separate more often, and have higher odds of adult suicide.” - Jonathan Gruber, Professor of Economics MIT

AT FAULT? SOMETIMES. NO FAULT? NEVER.

There are reasons for divorce. Before the advent of no-fault divorce, the at-fault divorce laws correctly penalized the at-fault spouse for marital breakdown for reasons of abuse, addiction, or abandonment. At fault divorce incentivized marriage-sustaining behavior and penalized the vow-breaking spouse socially and financially. No-fault divorce has led to skyrocketing rates of marital breakups largely unrelated to abuse, addiction or abandonment.

KIDS DON'T “GET OVER” DIVORCE

Divorce transfers the hard work from parent to child. It's the act of adults trading their own relationship troubles for their child's long-term physical and emotional health. Divorce is categorized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE). ACE's “are potentially traumatic events that can have negative lasting effects on health and well-being.”

No-fault divorce says, “*This cross is too heavy for us. Here kids, you take it instead.*”

INSTABILITY

“Divorce is deceptive. Legally is it a single event, but psychologically it is a chain- sometimes a never ending chain- of events, relocations, and radically shifting relationships strung through time, a process that forever changes the lives of the people.” - Judith Wallerstein

Instability is a feature of a child's life post-divorce. Divorce is often the beginning of the end of a child's relationship with their father, followed up with cohabiting partners, remarriage, more divorce, residential change, stepfamily, new baby half-siblings, or a preassembled set of new children.

“For us children it was an environment that was impossible, veering between a week with my mother and then a week with my father, it was like living on a permanent seesaw.”
- Peaches Geldof

UNLESS IT'S A VACATION HOME, TWO HOMES ARE NEVER BETTER THAN ONE

Oftentimes living in two homes means developing two different personalities. “Close to half of children said that after the divorce they felt like a different person with each of their parents... their divorced parents version of the truth were different... they were asked to keep important secrets— and many more felt the need to do so, even when their parents did not ask them to.”

“I lost myself in every effort to appease each side of my family. Shuffling alone between two separate lives meant that I was on the fringe of each family, never an insider. The people I loved most were never in the same room together, and many of them barely even knew each other existed.”

DIMINISHED MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, RELATIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Mental/Emotional Health. One long-term study of adults with a divorce in their background showed they suffered diminished outcomes in all aspects of their personal and professional lives. For kids struggling with baseline mental health issues, divorce poses an increased risk of recurrent adult depression and a higher likelihood of developing bipolar disorder.

"I was an emotional wreck as a teenager.... I hated myself. I blamed myself for the divorce, and wished I were dead.... I started taking antidepressants, then an entire cocktail of antidepressants, antipsychotics, and tranquilizers. Nothing helped; I was just tired and sick all the time now.... When I was thirteen, I made a suicide gesture. I spent four days in a locked psychiatric ward for children. I didn't fit the symptoms of depression or bipolar disorder; I was diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, but didn't get treatment for it until I was an adult, because my mother didn't believe the divorce could be traumatic." -Laura

Relational Health. Children whose parents divorced but never remarried are 45% more likely to end their own marriages. That percentage explodes to 91% more likely to divorce when their parents remarried. Millennials born in the wake of the divorce epidemic are wary of marriage and often opt to cohabit. Many avoid relationships altogether.

"I've only been in one adult relationship, mainly because I'm terrified of the hurt that rips the threads of your life apart—your home, your friends, your finances, your day-to-day life. Divorce will end your life as you know it. The biggest thing I learned from my parents' divorce is no matter how much you love the other person, if they choose to leave you, there isn't anything you can do to change their mind." -Leighaine

Physical Health. Parental divorce has been linked to heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. It's also been shown to double the likelihood kids will have trouble with their gut, skin, nervous system, genitals, and urinary organs. The correlation between divorced parents and their children's compromised health are so direct, any serious plan to reduce the cost of healthcare should begin with reducing the divorce rate.

"Even though I was achieving in [school and extracurriculars], inside I was consumed with anger, questions, and a feeling of wanting it all to end. Suicide was a constant thought that I battled my junior and senior years. I was in counseling most of my senior year. My health tanked. I was diagnosed with asthma, Raynaud's, and TMJ. All of these ailments didn't exist before my parents' separation." -Annie

Mother's love, father's love, and stability are the three staples of a child's social/emotional diet. In the best case scenario, divorce halves the first two, and obliterates the third. Negative outcomes for children of divorce are pervasive because these kids are relationally malnourished.

MENDING A MARRIAGE IS GOOD FOR BOTH KIDS AND PARENTS

A 2002 report from the Institute for American Values found:

- Two-thirds of unhappily married adults who choose to stick it out reported happier marriages five years later.
- Unhappy couples who divorced were no happier, on average, than those who stayed together.

"Contrary to popular belief, staying in an unhappy marriage could be the best thing you ever do."
-Harry Benson, research director of the Marriage Foundation

When it comes to a struggling marriage- someone will have to do the hard thing. It will either be the adults who must work to improve their relationship, or the kids who will be saddled with split lives and life-long risk.

Excerpts from chapter 5 of "Them Before Us: Why We Need a Global Children's Movement"

