



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

NHMRC October 2008 Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

The Impact of Divorce on Child Wellbeing

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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center broadcasted a webinar entitled “The Impact of Divorce on Child Wellbeing” on October 22, 2008. During the course of the webinar, we received more questions than we were able to answer. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is a follow-up to many of the questions posted during the webinar.

1. What affects a couples’ risk of divorce? Aren’t some couples more likely to divorce than others; we don’t all have a 50% chance of divorcing do we?

The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University has put together a calculator of sorts that provides statistical differences for divorce based on various couple characteristics. Research suggests that having higher household income, not giving birth before or within seven months of the wedding, marrying over age 25, growing up in a married household, being affiliated with some kind of religion and having some college education all reduce a couple’s chances of divorce. To calculate the average chance of divorce for a couple using these characteristics see their report (pg. 20).

<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2007.pdf>

2. How do we know that children of divorce wouldn’t have had the same outcomes if their parents had stayed in a bad marriage? How do we know that divorce is causing poor outcomes as opposed to being raised by parents in a bad marriage?

We don’t know for sure. The only way to “prove” that divorce causes negative effects on children would be to take a group of families and randomly assign half of them to divorce and the other half to stay together. Since we can’t do that, researchers employ other methods to isolate the possible effects of divorce. Some studies look at children before and after divorce so they are able to get a “baseline” of child functioning before their parents separate. Other studies look at the parents before and after the divorce. We know that only about 30% of divorces are the result of high-conflict marriages. Thus 70% of divorces are among low-conflict marriages. Children in those families were likely better off before the divorce. Children living in very high conflict or violent families, though, do better after divorce if the co-parent conflict and violence ceases (see Amato and Booth. (1997). *A Generation at Risk*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

3. How should couples talk to their children about their plans to divorce?

Couples should tell their children together. They need to stress that the divorce has nothing to do with the children – they didn’t cause it and couldn’t have prevented it. Remind the children that they will always be loved by their parents. Validate all feelings they have-- from anger, resentment to fear or even relief. Parents need to be ready to answer children’s questions about what’s going to happen, like “Where will I live?” “Where will Daddy live?” “Do I have to give up my dog?” “Can I still play sports?” For more information to help couples talk to their children about divorce, see the following resources:

University of Missouri’s Guide: <http://extension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/humanrel/gh6600.htm>
Iowa State University’s Fact Sheet:

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1638.pdf>
University of Florida's webpage: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE111>

4. How can adult children of divorce better ensure that their own marriages stay intact?

Marriage education may be especially beneficial for couples who were children of divorce. Adult children of divorce may have few positive relationship role models to draw from and ask for advice. Marriage education can help these couples learn effective communication and conflict resolution skills. These couples may also benefit from spending time with a mentor couple, especially to learn about the normal ups and downs present in any marriage.

5. What advice can programs give divorcing parents to help alleviate some of negative effects their children may feel?

Although going through a divorce will likely take a short-term toll on all involved, there are several things parents can do to help their children through the process. The first is to sit down, together, with their children and tell them about the plans to divorce. Let them know that they did nothing wrong, that they will always be loved by their parents and give them information about how and when some things will change (e.g., Daddy is going to go stay at Grandma's, but you will see him on Wednesdays and Saturdays). Parents need to work together to become good co-parents. Keep the other informed about parenting decisions, schedules, school information, etc. Respect visitation schedules and remain calm during exchanges. Some parents find it easier to meet in a neutral location (like a fast food restaurant) than each others' homes. Do not criticize the other parent in front of the children. Try to maintain similar rules and routines at both houses, like bedtime and computer policies,

so children don't have to learn two different systems. To the extent possible, try to minimize other changes in the children's lives. Parents who leave the family home should try to stay in the same neighborhood or school district. Parents should avoid introducing their children to any new partners and should keep other people and pets constant in the children's lives. That may mean driving them to the old neighborhood to see friends or making sure the children are still in contact with a parent's soon-to-be former in-laws. Finally, if parents suspect that their children are having a really hard time, they should be encouraged to seek additional help from a doctor, therapist or school guidance counselor.

6. Do children of failed unmarried cohabitation look different than or similar to children of divorce?

Although there is not a lot of research about children whose unmarried, cohabiting parents break up, we can speculate about how they may look similar to or different than children of divorce. For most measures, we can assume that children from failed cohabitations experience many of the same negative situations as children of divorce. They both may have to deal with moving, shuffling between both parents' homes, parental preoccupation with their failed relationship, poor parenting and co-parenting, and loss of income. In contrast, most unmarried couples don't experience a formal break-up like the legal processes divorcing couples have to complete. Thus, unmarried parents may be less likely to have completed a divorcing parenting class, to have established formal child support and to have a legal visitation agreement. To the extent that these things help stabilize life for children and alleviate some of the negative effects of divorce/breakup, children of splitting unmarried parents may fare worse than children of divorces.