

HEINONLINE

Citation: 5 Fam. L.Q. 1 1971

Content downloaded/printed from
HeinOnline (<http://heinonline.org>)
Wed Jul 18 14:19:05 2012

- Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at <http://heinonline.org/HOL/License>
- The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text.
- To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your HeinOnline license, please use:

[https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?
&operation=go&searchType=0
&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0014-729X](https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?&operation=go&searchType=0&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0014-729X)

Divorce is a Family Affair

JACK C. WESTMAN* and DAVID W. CLINE**

For most people, divorce is a step two adults take when their marriage fails. Although others obviously are affected, the impact of divorce is seen largely through the eyes of the man and woman. Actually, the penetrating roots of marriage are exposed through the effect of its disintegration on children, relatives and friends. The fact is that most American divorces occur in families with children. As a result, one out of six youngsters grow up today in homes either anticipating, experiencing or reverberating to divorce.

Much misunderstanding arises from the popular view of divorce as an *event*, as something that happens crisply and changes everything drastically. Divorce is commonly seen as the end of a relationship, the beginning of a “new life”—as a final closing of an unfruitful marriage—as a correction of error that sets the “books straight.” Actually divorce is an *adjustment of relationship* that does not erase the past nor create an unrelated future. For the departing husband it may mean a major change, living alone. For the wife and children life may be much the same, only more difficult. Divorce legally dissolves the marriage, but it only realigns the material and intangible bonds between the affected parties.

As those who have gone through it know, divorce really is a *process* consuming a few or many years, not just the months required to legalize the step. People rarely enter marriage with the expectation that divorce will occur. First there is a period of *disillusionment* that precedes thought and discussion of divorce. During this period, the marriage relationship is strained and the

*Professor of Psychiatry, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

**Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

children receive the backwash, even when open conflict has not occurred. At the very least, the rift between the parents creates an atmosphere in which their children lack an image of emotional honesty between adults.

After the disillusionment phase, parents often vacillate in reaching a decision to separate, with or without recourse to counseling. The decision to *separate* then follows. This occurs most commonly about five years after marriage, when children are young. The legal steps involved in *finalizing* the divorce action follow, occurring from 7 to 10 years after marriage. Thereafter, the *aftermath* of divorce consists of the years during which custody, visitation and financial arrangements are tested and adjusted. Feelings persisting after divorce can be powerful as shown by Goode's sociological study (2), which disclosed that half of a typical group of divorcees either wished to remarry or punish their ex-husbands years after the divorce occurred. All of these things illustrate that divorce is a long, drawn-out experience having its repercussions for the participants in many obvious and subtle ways.

In order to learn more about the actual experiences people have in connection with divorce, we must look beyond the available statistics. We know that divorce occurs 50% more frequently today than in 1940, but we know very little about the experience of living through divorce. Some people stress its pain; others its relief. For those concerned with divorce, it would be helpful to know more about typical things that occur.

A Study of "Problem" Divorces

In order to answer the questions of parents regarding the impact of divorce on their children, a University of Wisconsin research team studied a series of divorces affecting people from all walks of life in Dane County, Wisconsin (4). Information was obtained about what transpired before, during and after the divorce. All of the cases had received varying degrees of mandatory counseling, a fact that ensured that the divorce was not impulsive. Social work services were also available to help minimize the adverse effects of the divorce. In spite of these

efforts. one-third of the divorces involving children were followed by legal contests raised by one of the parties, either regarding the financial settlement, visitation rights, arrears in payments or custody disputes. Since these disputes came to the attention of the court through litigation, one can only assume that there were other conflicts that did not reach the level of legal action. This evidence clearly points out that divorce did not end the marital conflict in many situations. On the contrary, it affirms that if two people cannot agree before divorce, the likelihood is that they will fare no better after it.

The high incidence of post-divorce litigation indicates that the aftermath of divorce is frequently a turbulent experience for the affected adults and children. By examining each individual case with a turbulent course following the divorce, we sought to uncover the human situation underlying the legal suits. Our study disclosed that each situation was unique in its own right, but that variations occurred on several central themes. We clustered the patterns of divorce experience under the following headings:

1) *Parent-centered post-divorce turbulence*—In these cases the parents after divorce appeared to continue the same conflicts and relationships that existed beforehand. Sometimes one parent tries to use the power and authority of the court to punish or harrass the other spouse by continuing to discredit that spouse in the eyes of the court. As an extreme example, the parents of a 12 year-old-girl continually quarreled over her management. Although custody had been awarded to the mother who had fulltime employment, the father continued regular visits and found fault with his former wife's housekeeping, cooking and control of their daughter. He ultimately initiated court action to obtain custody of his daughter. Study of the court staff disclosed that neither parent was adequately able to meet the needs of the child. Placement in a foster home was arranged.

2) A second pattern was identified in which the post-divorce conflict was *child-centered* in origin. In these situations it appeared that the affected children manipulated the parents to

perpetuate continued conflict or to promote reuniting the parents. The effect was to continue an intense relationship between the parents.

Although most children of divorce wish that their parents would reunite under ideal circumstances, these children took active steps to either repair the marriage or return it to its conflict-ridden pre-divorce state. For example, a 9 year-old-boy visited his father on weekends and told him stories about the harsh treatment he was receiving from his mother. When he returned home to his mother, he told her about the idyllic existence of his father, leading her to believe that her son was being overindulged by his father. The parents developed exaggerated pictures of what went on in their respective homes. Each parent filed action in court complaining about the adverse influences of the other. When they were brought together and had an opportunity to obtain a more realistic picture of their son's role in exaggerating their concerns, they dropped their complaints and established regular contact to discuss plans for their son. They previously had decided to avoid direct conversation. In effect, their son was trying to bring them together in the only way available to him.

3) Another pattern was found in which *one parent and a child* teamed up to produce an effect on the other parent. Not infrequently a child sided with one parent or the other, though feeling ambivalent underneath. In these cases one parent appeared to deliberately undermine the other through a child. As an illustration, the father of a 13 year-old-girl frequently saw her both at home and away on what assumed the form of "dates." He deliberately provoked jealousy in his former wife and promoted his daughter's defiance of her mother. The mother petitioned the court to stop the father's visitation. Investigation of the case led the court to honor the mother's request and help the daughter recognize that her mother bore the responsibility for her upbringing and that her own interests were being subverted by her father.

4) Sometimes the perpetuation of post-divorce turbulence arose from the influence of *relatives*. This pattern confirmed the popular image of "meddling in-laws." In one case the wife's

parents always had disapproved of their son-in-law, promoting the divorce obtained by their daughter. After the divorce they encouraged her to demand an increase in support payments. On the other hand, the man's parents also had held longstanding antipathy for their daughter-in-law and her parents. They supported the husband in resisting an increase in alimony. They provoked his concern about the adverse effect of the maternal grandparents on the grandchildren. An active competition actually existed between the grandparents over the favor of the grandchildren. The court ultimately arranged to bring the feuding grandparents together to show them the effect their struggle was having on the grandchildren. This was unsuccessful, but the husband and wife could see more clearly their need to free themselves from their own parents' influence and resist the undermining influence of the grandparents.

5) Other cases defied categorization aside from being so *bizarre* that the truth was stranger than fiction. In these situations the divorce was incidental to continued and pervasive irrational behavior by the adults concerned. A case in point was a couple who had separated from each other 17 times with 3 divorces and 18 reconciliations.

Implications of Divorce for Children

With an appreciation of the turbulence associated with divorce, several general principles about the child's side of divorce merit attention (4). From the point of view of the affected children, divorce requires a number of important adjustments: 1) to the anxiety, confusion and strife of the conflict-ridden marriage, 2) to the absence of an image of adults with mutual affection and respect, 3) to the compromise of routine child-rearing responsibilities accompanying the disintegrating marriage, 4) to the prospect of change in parent relationships, and 5) to the parents' preoccupation with rearranging their own emotions and lives, leading to a reduction in attention to the children, or, in some cases, to an over-reliance on the children for support. If divorce were an event that occurred quickly, these associated repercussions would be minimized. The process of divorce is

lengthy, however. These side-effects are important and persistent realities for the affected children.

The specific ideas children entertain about the causes of divorce warrant special consideration. Because of their immaturity and natural tendency to see the world only through their own eyes, children generally exaggerate their own roles in causing the divorce. Frequently the cost of supporting children and the general burdens of raising children are reasons husbands give for leaving home. In addition, arguments between parents often revolve around the misbehavior and management of children. There ordinarily are many "proofs," such as these, in the minds of children that they are, in fact, the villains causing the divorce. Furthermore, children understandably feel that the departing parent is rejecting or abandoning them, perhaps, because they have not been "good" sons or daughters. All of these "half-truths" are exaggerated by inner negative feelings that children have about their parents' marriage. On one hand, they rely heavily upon the preservation of their parents' marriage. But on the opposite side the children feel jealousy at being excluded from the intimacy of their parents' relationship. Every child has moments when he feels like "running away" and finding an ideal home, when he wishes for better parents. These moments are more common in homes prone to divorce. All of these fantasies lead children, particularly the young, to automatically assume that the fracture of their parents' marriage has something to do with their hidden wish that it might occur.

The fact that the parents have mixed feelings before, during and after the divorce inevitably contributes to uncertainty and confusion in the minds of their children. But frequently, a divorced woman may be unable to recognize her own wish for reunion, or her own hurt over her husband's remarriage, only to find that her 8 year-old-son can speak these thoughts openly.

Turning to suggestions about handling divorce with children, the uniqueness of each situation highlights the folly of generalization. Much can be done to clarify the constructive management of the divorce experience for concerned parents through professional counseling with a psychiatrist, social worker or psychologist. Although it is too early to document the specific

effects, it is realistic to view divorce as potentially disadvantageous to children, and to give thought to minimizing adverse outcome.

Generally speaking, the hazards of divorce for children result not only from stressful events but because of misunderstandings (3). Every effort should be made to help the children understand the realities of the divorce experience. The keynote is to provide knowledge about what is happening and promote acceptance of it. All of this may take years and may be quite difficult, because many divorced couples themselves are not sure about what is going on. This leads to a series of simple, yet often overlooked, considerations:

1) The responsibility for making the decision to divorce belongs with the adults and not the children.

2) It is important for the children that the divorcing couple agree upon the realistic reasons for the divorce. Counseling can be used not only to prevent divorce but also to more adequately clarify why it is taking place.

3) Then, if the adults concerned know what they are doing and have a reasonable idea about why, this information can be shared realistically with the children. Paradoxically, it is difficult for many divorcing parents to admit to their children that they don't like each other, and that the divorce is a result of their being "bad" for each other. These parents prefer to say the divorce is occurring under "friendly" terms. This approach only mystifies children, who may have witnessed the opposite, or, if they haven't, may only conclude that the parents are withholding the truth, namely that they are getting divorced because of the children. It is also helpful for the children to know that the divorce is calculated to make each of the parents happier than they would be if they remained together. Nothing burdens the children more than feeling that their parents are going to continue to be unhappy, or unhappier, following what ought to be a problem-solving action. Facing these issues openly, although difficult to do, is profitable for the divorcing couple. When parents try to discuss their situation with their children, they discover their own irrational, and poorly understood, motivations in the divorce action. For the same reason many par-

ents finding themselves avoiding discussions with their children in order to hide their own uncertainty.

4) It is most important for parents to tailor the divorce settlement to their own situation. Many settlements are made in moments of desperation, indifference or vengence. The financial settlement should be enough, but not too much, so that it becomes unrealistic for the father to continue payments. Many children lose contact with their fathers because of excessive alimony and child support that may even cause the father to leave the state in order to avoid prosecution. This is particularly meaningful because many fathers remarry and assume the cost of raising two families. Visitation should be flexible and responsive to the children's needs: enough contact, but not impractically and rigidly prescribed. Sometimes fathers feel obliged to take their children for a whole weekend, spending more time together than fathers and children ordinarily need or desire. Older children may be much more interested in their own friends and resent an obligation to see their equally ambivalent parent.

5) Often feelings of embarrassment, shame or inadequacy stand in the way of a needed and still potentially rewarding relationship between parent and child. The father is still "my Dad" and needed by the child as an image. Sustained interest in the child on the part of the parent, however small, is treasured. Whatever defects the parents have are readily forgiven by a youngster who naturally tends to idealize his parents. The departing parent will help his child if he has something special to symbolize their bond. Today we need to underestimate the importance of family possessions and heirlooms that are particularly important when homes are broken and families dispersed.

6) Direct, continued planning by the separated parents around matters of child management is essential. Pride and bitterness frequently intrude, but the children's interests are best served if they are being mutually protected by the parents. Intermediaries between the parents on these matters cannot substitute for direct discussion. Misunderstandings and conflict are heightened when others are interposed, especially if the intermediaries stand to benefit from perpetuated conflict.

7) Discussing and working-through the divorce, its causes and sequelae are a life-long matter for affected children and their parents. One should not overlook the character building aspects of having lived through a stressful and painful experience. Many basic lessons in life can be learned through being the child of a divorced couple. One adult said she did not really understand why her own parents divorced each other until she became married herself. Only then could she understand why her parents separated.

8) The age of the child inevitably arises as a consideration in talking about divorce. Families have children of different ages, and each one has a unique capacity to understand and accept. Generally divorce has the greatest impact between the ages of 3 and 7 and runs the greatest risk of being misunderstood during those years. And this is the age span of most children experiencing divorces. During these early years the tendency to blame oneself and infer rejection by the departing parent are the greatest and the ability to understand the complexities the least. An important guideline is to stress simple facts, for example, that the parents don't like each other anymore, that they have changed their minds about being married, that they fight and argue, if they do. Whatever the child has heard and observed should be confirmed. If the child knows another woman is in Daddy's life, he deserves to know that his own Mommy has been hurt. The details of what will happen are also important: that Daddy will leave, and come back to visit; that he will have another place to live; that he will see the children and have birthday and Christmas celebrations or whatever the agreed-upon arrangements are; and that Mommy and Daddy are sad about this, if they are, but also that they are glad, if they are.

9) During the elementary years it is possible to emphasize for the child the human frailties of the parents. The child's questions will provide cues as to how much he wishes to know. During preadolescent years the child's self-esteem and standing with his peer group are the most vulnerable, so he will profit from awareness of the advantages of the divorce. Adolescents have more direct experience to go by since they have been with

the situation longer. They have the mental and emotional maturity to understand, and they can handle all of the details. But the adolescent is still too young to be burdened with participation in making the decision to divorce.

The increasing availability of child psychiatrists and community mental health services for children offers further aid in handling problem situations and providing preventive counseling to concerned parents.

Divorce is a fact of American life and deserves objective study rather than indifference, condemnation, or neglect. It may have redeeming features, but from the point of view of children divorce remains a stressful experience both because of the disruption of the home and the way of life caused by the disillusionment, separation, finalizing and aftermath of the divorce action itself. Divorce is expensive in cost, energy, and repercussions. The adverse impact can be minimized by realistic and sensitive attention to its effects on children. We should recognize that divorce does not end anything. It is merely an alteration in the living arrangements of affected families.

REFERENCES

1. GARDNER, R. A., *THE BOYS AND GIRLS BOOK ABOUT DIVORCE*, New York: Science House, Inc., 1970.
2. GOODE, WILLIAM J., *WOMEN IN DIVORCE*, New York: Free Press Paperback, 1965.
3. STEINZOR, B., *WHEN PARENTS DIVORCE*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1969.
4. Westman, J. C., Cline, D. W., Swift, W. J. and Kramer, D. A., *The Role of Child Psychiatry in Divorce*, *ARCHIVES OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY*, 23: 416-420, November, 1970.