

“*How Good for Children
Is the 'Good Divorce'?*
*Surprising Findings on
Educational Attainment and
Marital Success*”

— NORVAL D. GLENN



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norval D. Glenn was the Ashbel Smith Professor in Sociology and Stiles Professor in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, a founding member of the Council on Families at the Institute for American Values, and author of the paper *How Good for Children Is the "Good Divorce"?*

Propositions

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NOTE

*The full paper from which the following excerpt is drawn was written by Professor Norval Glenn prior to his death on February 15, 2011, and is available with citations and figures online at <http://www.americanvalues.org/good-divorce>. Readers interested in rigorous analysis of the idea of the “good divorce” might also wish to read a recently published paper, Paul R. Amato, Jennifer B. Kane, and Spencer James, “Reconsidering the ‘good divorce,’” *Family Relations*, Volume 60, Issue 5, pages 511–524, December 2011.*

What Is a “Good Divorce”?

ARGUABLY ONE OF THE LEAST WELL RESEARCHED ASPECTS OF THE effects of divorce on children is on the effects of the divorced parents’ post-marital relationship with one another and their involvement with their children. Research has indicated that conflict harms children to the extent that they are exposed to it. There has also been research on how the parental relationship affects specific outcomes, such as the child’s relationship with the father. But researchers generally have not tried to grapple with a broader spectrum of parental behaviors that may affect children.

The notable exception is found in the work of Constance Ahrons. Ahrons’ clinically-oriented, mostly qualitative research has been very influential in clinical

“Negative effects of divorce on children cannot be avoided merely by being cooperative.”

circles and among journalists and lay commentators on family issues. Her research on how parents handle the aftermath of divorce began in the late 1970s with in-depth interviews of 98 couples who had recently divorced in Dane County, Wisconsin.

From this work, Ahrons developed the concept of the “good divorce,” a term coined in the title of her influential 1994 book. Simply put, the good divorce, as she described it, occurs when ex-spouses cooperate to avoid destructive behaviors such as inconsistent parenting or letting children get caught in the middle of parental conflict. Most of Ahrons’ book is devoted to the barriers that stand in the way of

attaining a good divorce and advice on how to achieve it. More than 50 percent of the couples that Ahrons studied were able to attain what Ahrons considered to be a good divorce (some after a failure to do so initially) and to form what she calls a “binuclear family.” Ahrons concludes that a good divorce is much better for children than a “bad divorce”—hardly a controversial proposition in itself.

However, journalistic and other lay interpreters of the idea of the good divorce went beyond this straightforward proposition to give the impression that if the parents have a good divorce, their children will not be substantially harmed by the divorce. Ahrons’ publisher, in the blurb on the paperback edition, said the book “is a powerful tonic for the millions of divorcing and long-divorced parents who are tired of hearing only the damage reports. . . .” A typical journalistic treatment concluded that “*how* parents divorce matters even more than the divorce itself” (Scelfo, 2004)—a belief also expressed by some academicians and family professionals (e.g., Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Lawler, 2003). At its extreme, the popular view of the good divorce seems to suggest that, for the children involved, a good divorce is an adequate substitute for a good marriage and is certainly better than a mediocre marriage.

Although it is clear that a good divorce *is* generally better for children than a bad divorce, there are reasons to think that some negative effects of divorce on children cannot be avoided merely by divorcing parents being cooperative and avoiding destructive behaviors. Unless parents go to unlikely extremes, the children will no longer see both parents on a daily basis, will be shuttled between households, and will have parents who are distracted by the stresses of single parenthood, attempting to establish new relationships, and, quite often, struggling with economic hardships. Remarriage of the non-custodial parent (usually the father) is likely to result in further dilution and diversion of parental resources, including financial ones, as the parent acquires responsibilities not only for a new spouse but also often for stepchildren and children born in the new marriage.

A Comparative Study of Grown Children of Good and Bad Divorces, and Happy and Unhappy Marriages

THIS PAPER REPORTS FINDINGS FROM THE QUANTITATIVE PORTION of a mixed methods study designed to provide insight into just how good good divorces are for children. This was one of the first such large scale studies and included a comparison group of persons whose parents did not divorce. We assessed the extent to which parents can substantially reduce the negative

impact of divorce on their children by avoiding destructive behaviors, and we estimated the degree to which this avoidance can make the children's lives as good as those of children whose parents have various kinds of intact marriages.

In her book *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, my co-investigator, Elizabeth Marquardt, explored in detail our findings on how a good divorce compares to a bad divorce (a bad divorce being one in which a parent does not maintain contact with a child, or the parents engage in destructive behaviors such as asking the child to keep secrets, making the child feel he or she has to take sides in conflicts, having different rules or different versions of truth in each home,

“ Children whose parents had good divorces can fare worse compared to those whose parents had unhappy marriages. ”

or otherwise having what the grown children recalled as “a lot” of post-divorce conflict). The study also compared how a good divorce compares to very happy and low-conflict marriages, unhappy and low-conflict marriages, and unhappy and high-conflict marriages. Appendix A in *Between Two Worlds* reveals that on many indicators, grown children who report their parents had good divorces fare worse overall even compared to those whose parents had unhappy marriages, so long as those marriages were low-conflict (as are most that end in divorce). And the children of good divorces definitely fared worse on many indicators compared to those whose parents had happy marriages.

This paper focuses on two other areas that were not explored in depth in that book. These two areas are educational attainment and later marital success for grown children of different types of divorces and marriages.

A large body of existing research has shown educational attainments of grown children of divorce to be lower on average than those of other adults whose background characteristics were otherwise similar. And one of the largest bodies of evidence on grown children of divorce pertains to their marriages, which have been found to be less stable and of lower quality on average than their other background characteristics predict. This paper offers an additional nuanced and surprising look at how the quality of the parents' divorce or marriage influences these outcomes.

In our analysis, we found, not surprisingly, strong evidence that divorcing parents can harm their children's well-being by engaging in destructive behaviors after the divorce. For example, children of bad divorces were more likely to report that they had many losses in their life, that their parents' versions of truth were often different, and that they felt like adults even as children. The effects on their psychological well-being as adults were also negative and statistically significant.

But, surprisingly, we found a lack of evidence that bad divorces have substantial negative effects on educational and marital outcomes.

Educational Attainment

WITH REGARD TO EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES, WE SUSPECTED THAT destructive post-divorce parental behaviors would impede educational attainment in several ways, including by creating stress that makes concentrating on schoolwork difficult and by lessening concerted adult encouragement and assistance for school achievement.

Yet in our study, while grown children of divorce did have lower educational attainments than those whose parents remained married, the good divorce as defined here did little to prevent or offset this outcome. The lack of evidence that good divorces (compared to bad divorces) are very beneficial for the educational attainments of offspring is counter-intuitive, given that stress and emotional problems growing out of destructive parental actions are likely to make it difficult for children and adolescents to concentrate on schoolwork. Given this lack of evidence in favor of the good divorce, perhaps what is more important is simply the extent to which divorced parents have the time and energy and are present to supervise homework, give encouragement, and engage in similar activities that are conducive to scholastic achievement, and the extent to which financial resources are available to each son or daughter. In other words, the dilution and diversion of parental resources of all kinds (such as a remarried father investing his resources in his new set of children, rather than the educational attainment of children from his previous marriage), which good divorces as defined here can do little to prevent or offset, may be the main reason that grown children of divorce have lower average educational attainments than those from intact families.

Marital Success

WE SUSPECTED THAT BAD DIVORCES WOULD BE ASSOCIATED WITH poor marital outcomes because they model poor relationship and conflict resolution skills for children and adolescents and may give the

impression that good male-female relationships are almost impossible to attain.

However, the evidence concerning the effects of bad divorces on the marital outcomes of offspring are the least expected and most counter-intuitive of the findings from this study. Separate results for males and females show no statistically significant relationships for males but moderate statistically significant *positive* estimated effects of bad divorces on the marital outcomes of female offspring. In other words, compared to those whose parents had a good divorce, women whose parents had a bad divorce were more likely at the time of our survey to report they were in a good quality, lasting first marriage.

The lack of evidence that good divorces contribute to good offspring marriages is surprising, if only because parents who avoid destructive post-separation behaviors model better relationship skills than do other divorced parents. Especially

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surprising is the estimated *positive* effect of bad divorces on the marital success of the female grown children of divorce. As with any counter-intuitive finding from one study, this finding needs to be replicated by additional research before it is regarded as anything more than suggestive. However, it is consistent, in a general kind of way, with findings indicating that offspring are harmed more by divorce if their parents had a low-conflict marriage than if they had a high-conflict one (Amato & Booth, 1997; Amato, 2001). If parents have a low-conflict marriage

and then a low-conflict and amicable divorce, offspring may be more inclined to lose confidence in the institution of marriage itself than if the parents engage in destructive behaviors before and after the divorce. In the latter case, the failure of the parental marriage can be blamed on the parents themselves rather than on the institution of marriage. Conversely, if good persons with good relationship skills cannot make a marriage work, then there is little reason, this line of thinking might go, to be optimistic about having a good marriage. There are theoretical reasons for thinking, and some empirical evidence indicating, that lack of confidence in marital success inhibits marital commitment and thus is conducive to marital failure.

Of course, there are other possible explanations. For instance, victims of a nasty parental divorce may tend to be unusually motivated to avoid marital failure, or parents who have amicable relations with one another but nevertheless decide to divorce may on average place relatively little value on marital permanence and may transmit that attitude to their offspring. While we have no way of explaining this finding with certitude, it does potentially offer important insight into the experience of young persons of good and bad divorces as they embark on their own marriages.

Advice for Parents and Professionals

THE MAIN IMPLICATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY FOR divorcing parents, parents considering divorce, and professionals who work with these parents and their children is that a so-called good divorce, while clearly preferable to a bad one, falls far short of being a good substitute for a good parental marriage, and in some respects does not even seem to be a good substitute for a mediocre parental marriage. In terms of furthering the well-being of offspring, the first goal to be pursued by parents in troubled but not high-conflict marriages should be to improve the marriage if there is any reasonable prospect of success in doing so. Finally, if a divorce has occurred or must occur, no one should assume that parents avoiding clearly destructive behaviors will alone prevent or substantially reduce the potential negative consequences on the children as they come of age. □

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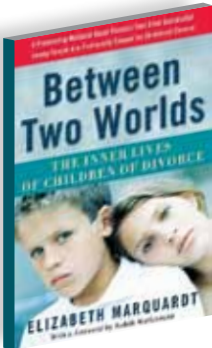
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Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce

By Elizabeth Marquardt

(Three Rivers Press 2006) \$13.95

Together with sociologist Norval Glenn, Elizabeth Marquardt conducted a study of the children of divorce, surveying 1,500 young adults from both divorced and intact families.



Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences

A report from a team of eighteen family scholars
chaired by W. Bradford Wilcox

(Broadway Publications 2011) \$6.50

The latest edition of Why Marriage Matters offers new findings, including why recent increases in cohabitation and family instability pose a risk to children.