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Op-Ed Column

Divorce doesn't have to devastate the children

Divorce is back in the news. Just as ex-spouses give different accounts of their failed marriage, psychologists debate the extent of damage that divorce causes children.

A California study, criticized for its methodology, sounded an alarm that drove couples in conflict to embrace the pre-1970s mantra, "Stay together for the sake of the children."

Now, Mavis Hetherington's Virginia study, considered the gold standard of research among those who conduct such studies, gives us a more nuanced picture of the aftermath of a family breakup. In the short run, divorce does exact a toll from the entire family. But the long-term outlook isn't as bleak. Or at least it doesn't have to

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be so.

When parents retain their role as loving authorities to their children and keep the children out of the crossfire, divorce doesn't necessarily leave painful scars, and it even may benefit kids. When parents vent their hurt and anger in front of the children, they do so at the expense of the kids. Adults

who stop acting like adults leave their children rightly wondering, "Who is watching out for us?"

The fear and embarrassment when parents exchange verbal, and sometimes physical, blows are bad enough. They are even worse when parents enlist children as allies in the battle. In such families, children feel pressure to pledge allegiance to one parent by rejecting the other. They endure a constant refrain that conveys the message, "Your mom (or dad) is a horrible person. I hate her, and so should you." Or only a slightly milder version, "It is OK with me if you hate her, too."

Sensing that their worth is measured by the degree of loyalty to a hurt and vindictive parent, children learn to hide from one

parent their positive feelings for the other. A few become little diplomats moving back and forth between two hostile nations while maintaining relatively cordial relations with both. Others succumb to pressure and begin to treat one parent with increasing disrespect.

Perhaps because the spectacle of divorced parents bad-mouthing each other to the children is so prevalent, we have come to accept it as a natural byproduct of divorce. But there is nothing natural about it. Parents normally protect their children, especially in a crisis. Many divorced parents do just that; they take the high road and keep their children out of the middle of their conflicts.

Imagine the outrage if a teach-

er were to put down a child's parents during class: "Your mother is crazy, and your father cares only about his girlfriend." If we regard such destructive criticism as an outrageous betrayal of responsibility toward children, why is it any less a travesty when the words come from a parent?

The failure of a marriage is a chilling lesson that we can't always count on love. At such a vulnerable time in their lives, children especially need and deserve as much love as they can get. Interfering with their loving relationship with a parent is a cruel violation of their trust.

We must promote an ethos that holds in esteem parents who rise above the hurt and disappointment of their failed marriage and guard their children's birthright to the love of two parents.

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