

The children's view: The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce. By Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee. Hyperion, 316 pp., \$24.95.

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce, by Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee

Anyone who needs more evidence that divorce harms children should examine Judith Wallerstein's book, written with her colleague Julia M. Lewis and science writer Sandra Blakeslee. Her 25-year follow-up study of 131 children whose parents divorced in the early '70s convinced her that "the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Rather, it rises in adulthood as serious romantic relationships move to center stage." Wallerstein presents her findings through the stories of seven children, five from families of divorce and two from troubled intact families. These detailed—and representative—case histories are interspersed with vignettes of other families, statistics, analysis and comment.

Wallerstein begins by contrasting the lives of Karen and Gary, two children of moderately unhappy marriages. One set of parents divorced, the other stayed together. The history of children such as these leads to one of Wallerstein's main conclusions: If a marriage is not so explosive or chaotic or unsafe that husband and wife find living together intolerable, they should seriously consider staying together for the sake of their children. "If a couple can maintain their loving, shared parenting without feeling martyred," assuring the benefits of the marriage for their children is worth bearing their unhappiness with each other.

The depth of her knowledge of the families she discusses and her sympathy with the parents as well as the children make Wallerstein's conclusions convincing. In discussing the divorce of Karen's parents, she shows how often divorce is precipitated by factors outside the marriage, such as the death of a parent, loss of a job, or serious illness of a child. If spouses who turn to one another for comfort fail to find kindness or tenderness, their anger may lead to an impulsive end to the marriage.

The grief and anger of the parents often turn the oldest or most competent child into the caregiver on whom parents and siblings rely. She becomes accustomed to sacrificing her own needs and development, and is likely to have serious difficulties in establishing a healthy and loving adult relationship or marriage of her own.

In contrast, Gary's equally unhappy parents drew on a residue of love for each other and of concern for their children in order to remain together. Though the children were aware of their mother and father's difficulties with each other, the stable family life gave them the happiness and security to concentrate on school and friendships and to grow up well. Indeed, Wallerstein contends that the notion that children will necessarily be unhappy if their parents' marriage is unhappy is a myth. She rejects what she calls "the trickle-down theory of happiness"—the widely held idea, often used to justify divorce, that if the parents are happy, their children will be happy.

When Wallerstein examines violent and demeaning marriages, however, her conclusions are quite different. Children who grow up in such marriages may indeed be worse off than are the children whose parents divorce. Yet examining such marriages has led Wallerstein to an unexpected insight. Even young children who repeatedly have seen their fathers beat their mothers are unlikely to understand why their parents are divorcing. Few parents adequately tell their children the reasons for the divorce, or realize that they need to reexplain the divorce as the children grow and mature. Most children are surprised and bewildered by their parents' divorce, and many get little beyond a "real estate" explanation: "From now on, mommy is going to live here and daddy is going to live there." Wallerstein faults the courts for being oblivious to the well-being of the children of violent marriages. That one spouse has been physically abusive to the other seems to make little difference in legal provisions for children's welfare.

Divorce is especially devastating to young children, and, since 80 percent of divorces occur during the first nine years of marriage, the majority of children in

divorce are young. Divorce almost always means a great deterioration in the quality of parenting a child receives, Wallerstein asserts, because both parents become preoccupied with the task of reestablishing their economic, social and sexual lives. Joint custody arrangements work well only for some children; court-enforced visitation can require a frightened young child to travel long distances alone or seriously interfere with the friendships and activities of older children. Special-needs children are likely to have a particularly hard time; the end of the parents' marriage is likely to mean that the children's needs are no longer adequately met. A far smaller percentage of divorced parents than married parents pay for their children's college educations, even when they have adequate means. The grown sons of divorced fathers are far less likely to have a close relationship with their fathers, and the children of divorce are more reluctant to care for their aging parents.

Even those children who seem the most cherished by their divorced parents suffer long-term consequences, Wallerstein argues. Nearly all the children whose lives she followed into adulthood struggled as they tried to establish healthy relationships with the opposite sex or to become parents themselves. A far greater percentage than those from intact families never married or lived in committed relationships. Many others impulsively rushed into inappropriate early marriages without giving much thought to the kind of partner they wanted or needed. Many had much too low expectations of partners and of marriage. The fear of loss, terror at conflict, and lack of good models of long-term marriages all make it more difficult for those whose parents divorced to establish good, lasting relationships themselves.

Yet the news is not all bad. A number of the people whose stories Wallerstein tells did finally succeed in their struggle to understand themselves and to become good spouses and parents. And it's possible that Wallerstein overstates her case. By the end of the book I found myself protesting that other kinds of losses, difficulties and traumas could cause some of the problems she ascribes to divorce. Surely the children of happy marriages also sometimes have troubled adult relationships. And surely the children she interviewed had some joyful experiences and happy times. Surely friendships and extended families filled some of the void left by inadequate parenting. Wallerstein's focus is on the problems, since she wants to counter what she regards as the myths that justify the culture of divorce. She feels that contemporary society has concentrated far too much on what is best for adults and far too little on what is best for children. And she is convinced that the interests of parents and of children most often do not coincide when it comes to divorce.

Wallerstein concludes with a chapter of advice intended, first, to strengthen families. In addition to urging parents to stay together for the sake of their children, she calls on society to make a greater commitment to strengthening families. The workplace especially needs to become sensitive to giving young people the time to build close, supportive marriages. But she knows that many parents will continue to divorce. Her specific suggestions for how they can plan for their children's welfare should do much to protect the well-being of those children. If we want to improve our divorce culture, she urges, we need to provide better social services for families that are breaking up. We must provide better help in protecting each individual child, and in assisting parents in planning for their children's welfare as those children grow and their needs change.

Wallerstein especially faults the courts, which have been leaders in setting national policies and priorities in regard to divorce, for not adequately safeguarding children, and urges them to attend to the long-term circumstances of children's lives. Wallerstein praises the good work that churches and synagogues have done in attempting to strengthen marriages and protect children, but emphasizes how much more needs to be done. Though her book says little about religion, no other book I know shows so clearly why religious people must care about marriage and the family.