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*How Good
for Children
is the
“Good Divorce”*

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NOTE

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HOW GOOD FOR CHILDREN IS THE “GOOD DIVORCE”?

One of the most important developments in the study of children and divorce in recent years has been an increased emphasis on trying to distinguish among the effects of the various stages of the process in which parents develop marital problems or discontents, separate, divorce, and then maintain (or fail to maintain) a relationship with one another and with their children after the divorce. Instead of just asking, what are the effects of divorce, researchers have asked about the effects of each stage of this process (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1997; Cherlin et al., 1991, 1998) and of various aspects of the aftermath of divorce, such as custody and living arrangements (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Maccoby & Nmookin, 1992; Nelson, 1989), changes in residence (Booth & Amato, 1993; Astone & McLanahan, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), living with single parents (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), and becoming members of step-families (Amato & Booth, 1997; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; White, 1994). The research has been extended to investigate how the effects of post-divorce influences differ according to the pre-divorce nature of the parental marriage (Amato & Booth, 1997; Jekielek, 1998; Videon, 2002). Even though a precise and definitive separation of the effects of the different stages and developments is not possible, much has been learned. Accumulation of knowledge on this topic needs to continue, because it has important implications for the decisions of parents about their marriages and post-marital relationships and about what interventions in the marital disintegration process can best serve the children involved.

Arguably the least well researched aspect of the effects of divorce and its aftermath on children is on the effects of the parents' post-marital relationship with one another and their involvement with the children in that relationship. Some research has estimated the effects of post-separation parental conflict (Amato & Booth, 1997; Buchanan, et al., 1991, 1996) and not surprisingly has indicated that the conflict harms children to the extent that the children are exposed to it and feel "caught between the parents," to use the language of Buchanan, et al. (1991). And there has been research on how the parental relationship affects specific outcomes, such as the child's relationship with the father (Sobolewski & King, 2005). However, the parental relationship variables have been related to a limited number of outcome variables, and researchers generally have not tried to deal with anything approaching the totality of behaviors that divorced parents commonly engage in that may affect their offspring.

The most notable exception to this general rule is the work of Constance Ahrons (1994, 2004, 2007), whose clinically-oriented and mostly qualitative research has been very influential in clinical circles and among journalists and lay commentators on family issues and has received moderate attention from quantitative researchers on children and divorce. Ahrons' research on how parents handle the aftermath of divorce, the Binuclear Family Study, began in the late 1970s with in-depth interviews with 98 couples (196 individuals) who had recently divorced in Dane County, Wisconsin—the county in which Madison and the main campus of the University of Wisconsin are located. The interviewed couples were about half of those couples who were eligible for the study and were asked to participate, so the response rate was similar to that for recent random digit dialing phone surveys. As many of the original respondents as possible were re-interviewed three and five years later, and as many of the new partners (spouses and cohabitators) of the core respondents as possible were also interviewed in the second and third waves. Twenty years after the first wave of interviews, Ahrons interviewed 172 offspring of the divorced couples in the study.

Ahrons developed the concept of the "good divorce," the main title of her influential 1994 book (Ahrons, 1994), out of the materials from the parental and partner interviews. Simply put, the good divorce, as conceived of by Ahrons, occurs when the ex-spouses cooperate by following well understood

rules to avoid a number of destructive behaviors in which divorced parents commonly engage, such as letting children “get caught in the middle” of parental conflict, inconsistent parenting, and the like. We do not claim that this simple characterization does justice to Ahrons’ rich concept, but it captures its essence. Most of Ahrons’ book is devoted to the complications and barriers that stand in the way of attaining a good divorce and to advice as how to attain it in spite of the barriers. There is no operationalization of the good divorce in the book of the sort that would be found in a report of quantitative research, and the evidence Ahrons reports about the consequences of having a good divorce is qualitative and illustrated with case materials. The main descriptive finding is that 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,” a bifurcated but nevertheless somewhat cohesive and mainly harmonious family unit. The main causal conclusion to be derived from the research is that a good divorce is much better for children than a “bad divorce”—hardly a controversial proposition in itself.

However, the journalistic and other lay interpreters of the good divorce concept, as well as Ahrons and her publisher by implication, go beyond this simple and almost obvious proposition to give the impression that if the parents have a good divorce, their children will not be substantially harmed by the divorce. For instance, the blurb on the back of the paper edition says that the book “is a powerful tonic for the millions of divorcing and long-divorced parents who are tired of hearing only the damage reports. . . .” And one of the typical journalistic treatments of the good divorce concept concludes 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 comes close to asserting that, for the children involved, a good divorce is an adequate substitute for a good marriage and is certainly better than a mediocre one. We do not attribute this view to Ahrons, but it has evolved out of her concept of the good divorce, seems to be widespread, and thus deserves to be addressed by systematic research.

Ahrons’ own research does not address how well the good divorce compares with different kinds of intact marriages, because she used no comparison group

of intact couples and their offspring. Her twenty-year follow-up study of the children of her original subjects dealt with such important topics as how the quality of the parental divorce affected kin relations in the long run (Ahrons, 2007) and may have dealt with outcomes not yet reported in the literature, but in the absence of a non-divorce comparison group, the research could not deal with how well good divorces protected offspring from long-term negative effects of parental divorces on such outcomes as marital success and educational achievement. It seems clear to us, therefore, that there is a need for research on just how good the good divorce is for children, both before and after they become adults, not only relative to a bad divorce but to various kinds of intact parental marriages.

Although it is clear that a good divorce is generally better for children than a bad one, there are reasons to think that some negative effects on children of a parental separation and its aftermath cannot be avoided merely by the parents being cooperative and avoiding destructive behaviors. Unless the parents go to unlikely extremes in their attempts to make life better for their children, the children will no longer see both parents on a daily basis, will be shuttled back and forth between households, and will have to deal with the parents being distracted by such things as the stresses of single parenthood, attempts to establish new relationships, and, quite often, economic hardships (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Remarriage of the non-custodial parent (usually the father) is likely to result in a dilution and diversion of parental resources, especially financial ones, as the parent acquires responsibilities not only for the new spouse but also often for step-children and children born in the new marriage. Of course, some such dilution occurs if parents stay married and have additional children, but a new spouse is likely to be able to influence a parent to divert resources away from children of a previous marriage to an extent that is greater than the dilution that results when an intact couple has additional children. One could argue that many of these influences are avoidable, but it is unrealistic to expect parents to sacrifice their own needs to the extent that would be required to avoid them, for instance by refraining from seeking new relationships or by staying close enough together that both parents could spend time with the children almost daily.

In this paper we report findings from the quantitative portion of a mixed methods study designed to provide insight into just how good so-called good divorces are for children—the only recent and large-scale study to

our knowledge that has focused on this issue. The main focus of the study was, in common with Ahrons' original study, on the pre-adult quality of life of the children of divorce. There is a large literature that rather consistently indicates that the emotional life of children is typically harmed by their parents' separation, with the most severe consequences being in the first few months after the separation (see Amato & Keith, 1991a for a summary of much of the evidence), although the end of high conflict parental marriages may typically benefit children emotionally (Amato & Booth, 1997; Jekielek, 1998). In our research, we assessed the extent to which parents can substantially reduce the negative pre-adult quality of life impact of their divorce on their children by avoiding destructive behaviors, and we extended this line of research to estimate the degree to which this avoidance can make the children's post-divorce, pre-adult lives as good as those of the pre-adult lives of children whose parents have various kinds of intact marriages.

Our study also gathered limited information on some young adult characteristics that have been found to differ between adult "children of divorce" (CODs) and other adults. Studies have shown adult CODs to have moderately lower average psychological well-being, such as reported happiness and satisfaction, net of several other influences, than other adults (Amato & Booth, 1991b, 1997; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Glenn & Kramer, 1985; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979), and a large body of research has shown the educational attainments of CODs to be lower on average than those of other adults whose background characteristics were otherwise similar (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1997; Biblarz & Raferty, 1993; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Manski et al., 1992). One of the largest bodies of evidence on adult CODs pertains to their marriages, which have been found to be less stable and of lower quality on average than their other background characteristics predict (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Booth & Edwards, 1990; D'Onofrio et al., 2007; Glenn & Kramer, 1987; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Pope & Mueller, 1976; Teachman, 2002; Wolfinger, 2005). Ahrons did not deal with any of these apparent long-term effects of parental divorces, so we go beyond her research by estimating the extent to which divorcing parents' avoiding destructive behaviors can reduce or prevent these apparent negative effects.

An incidental aspect of our study provides evidence of how different kinds of intact parental marriages affect pre-adult quality of life and the young adult outcome variables included in the study. Because there already is much

evidence on this general topic, especially on the effects of parental conflict (Acock & Demo, 1999; Amato & Booth, 1997, 1991a, 1991b; Booth & Edwards, 1990; Caspi & Elder, 1988; Emery, 1982, 1988; Fincham, 1994; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), this is the least unique part of our research, but we provide additional details about how different combinations of parental marital conflict and marital quality apparently affect offspring.

We hypothesized that all of the estimated effects of “badness” of the divorces on the outcome variables would be negative. The basis of the hypothesis for pre-adult quality of life is so obvious that it needs no discussion, and anything that affects pre-adult quality of life negatively is likely to also negatively affect psychological well-being in young adulthood, if only because recollections of childhood can affect adult well-being (Amato, 1991). Destructive post-divorce parental behaviors seem likely to impede educational attainment in several ways, including by creating stress that makes concentrating on schoolwork difficult and lessening concerted adult encouragement and assistance for school achievement. Bad parental divorces seem likely to 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.

The results of previous research (especially Amato & Booth, 1997) as well as the reasoning explicated above led us to predict that the estimated effects of a good divorce would not equal those of high-quality, low-conflict intact parental marriages on any of the outcome variables, but otherwise we did not predict how well good divorces would fare in relation to different kinds of intact marriages.

METHOD

Data

The data for the study reported here are from an American national telephone survey conducted in 2003 titled “The Moral and Spiritual Development of the Children of Divorce” and supported by a grant to the Institute for American Values from the Lilly Endowment. The survey firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc., conducted the interviews, which were with random digit

dialing samples of 1,506 persons ages eighteen through thirty-five whose biological or adoptive parents married before they (the respondents) were born and who did not die before the respondents reached age eighteen. Of these, 751 had parents who divorced before they were age fifteen (the “children of divorce” or CODs) and 755 had parents who did not divorce (the INTACTs). The sample of children of divorce was further restricted to those who saw both parents at least once per year from the time of the divorce until they reached age eighteen or left home, whichever occurred first. Norval D. Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt constructed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed largely from the results of seventy-one in-depth interviews in four regions of the United States, conducted by Marquardt with persons in the same age range as the respondents to the national survey and also divided between those whose parents divorced before they were age fifteen and those whose parents did not divorce. The American Association of Public Opinion Research recommends four slightly different methods of computing response rates for telephone surveys, and the rates computed by these methods for our survey vary from 45.5 to 49.6 percent. These rates are normal for recent telephone surveys in the United States (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2005).

Measures

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: The first independent variable for the research is what we call the Bad Divorce Scale (BDS), which is based on Ahron’s (1994) concept of the good divorce and is an inverse measure of that construct. The scale, which of course is applicable only to the children of divorce, is based on whether or not those respondents reported that after the divorce their parents engaged in each of eight clearly destructive behaviors. The scale score is simply the sum of the destructive behaviors, with “0” indicating no such behaviors (what we label the good divorce) and “8” indicating that all of them occurred. Thus, our operational definition of the good divorce is based on the absence of negative behaviors rather than on the presence of positive ones, but the parents had to cooperate in order to avoid most of the destructive behaviors. Obviously, absence of the eight destructive behaviors included in the scale does not necessarily mean that the divorce was the best possible one for the children. Various degrees of positive behaviors no doubt existed among the divorces scored “0”, and there might have been kinds of negative post-divorce parental behavior not included in the list of eight. However, in view of the fact

that only 19.1 percent of the CODs in the sample reported none of the eight destructive behaviors, a score of “0” on the Bad Divorce Scale represents an unusually good divorce.

The bad divorce indicators included in the BDS are (1) there was “a lot” of post-divorce parental conflict, (2) a parent kidnapped the child, (3) a parent told the child he/she might be kidnapped by the other parent, (4) a parent asked the child to keep secrets from the other parent, (5) the child had to take sides in parental conflict, (6) the child did not feel protected from parental worries, (7) the parents’ household rules were not the same, and (8) what the mother and what the father said was true were not the same. The alpha for the scale is .731.

For analyses in which the respondents whose parents did not divorce were included, the independent variable is a nominal one that we call Parental Marital Situation (PMS). This variable consists of three categories of the CODs (BDS = 0, 1–2, and 3+, respectively) and three categories of the INTACTs based on their reports of the quality of, and degree of conflict in, their parents’ marriages. The latter three are “low conflict, very happy,” “low conflict, less than very happy,” and “high conflict, less than very happy.” (We excluded from the analyses forty-three respondents who reported high conflict, very happy parental marriages because the *n* is insufficient for reliable estimates of population characteristics.) The number of respondents in each category of the PMS is shown in Table 1.

For construction of the PMS, we considered a response of either “a lot” or “some” to indicate high conflict and either “not much” or “hardly at all” low conflict. A very low frequency of “not at all happy” responses to the marital happiness question (see Table 1) made “very happy” versus less than very happy the appropriate way to dichotomize the reports of parental marital happiness.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES: The outcome variables for the study reported here include one pre-adult variable and five adult variables.

The pre-adult variable is the Pre-Adult Quality of Life Scale (PAQLS), based on the responses to twenty scalable questions (alpha = .844) about the respondents’ lives before they reached age eighteen and, in the case of the

Table 1Distributions Major Variables, in Percent (*n* in parentheses)^a

| BAD DIVORCE SCALE | | |
|--|-------|---------|
| 0 | 19.1 | |
| 1 | 22.7 | |
| 2 | 15.2 | |
| 3 | 13.7 | |
| 4 | 11.3 | |
| 5 | 10.4 | |
| 6 | 6.3 | |
| 7 | 0.9 | |
| 8 | 0.3 | |
| Total | 100.0 | (690) |
| PARENTAL MARITAL SITUATION | | |
| Intact, low conflict, very happy | 22.5 | |
| Intact, low conflict, less than very happy | 15.0 | |
| Intact, high conflict, less than very happy | 13.9 | |
| Good divorce, no bad divorce indicators | 9.3 | |
| Bad divorce, 1 or 2 bad divorce indicators | 18.4 | |
| Bad Divorce, 3+ bad divorce indicators | 20.9 | |
| Total | 100.0 | (1,379) |
| PRE-ADULT QUALITY OF LIFE SCALE | | |
| 0 – 10 | 0.2 | |
| 11 – 20 | 2.0 | |
| 21 – 30 | 8.7 | |
| 31 – 40 | 18.3 | |
| 41 – 50 | 33.8 | |
| 51 – 60 | 37.0 | |
| Total | 100.0 | (1,415) |
| Very happy | 56.6 | (1,497) |
| Very satisfied | 61.1 | (1,504) |
| Never-divorced ^a | 83.3 | (1,008) |
| In very happy intact first marriage ^b | 58.5 | (990) |
| College graduate | 43.1 | (1,502) |

^aCases with missing values excluded. ^bEver-married respondents only.

CODs, after their parents divorced and before they reached age eighteen. Most of the twenty questions are in the form of statements to which the respondents could “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” For these questions, we scored the most favorable response, in terms of quality of life, “3,” the least favorable response “0” and the intermediate ones “1” or “2.” A few of the questions required a “yes” or “no” response, in which case we scored the more favorable response “3” and the other one “0.” The scale value for each respondent is the sum of the scores. Examples of statements on which the scale is based are “It was stressful in my family,” “I always felt like an adult, even when I was a little kid,” “I felt a need to protect my mother emotionally,” “Christmas or Hanukkah was a stressful time in my family,” “Children were the center of my family,” and “My family was in the habit of sharing a daily meal together.” (A complete list of the items is available from the first author on request.) For some of the analyses we used the raw scale scores and for others we dichotomized the scores, with those at or above the median coded “1” and those below the median “0.” The PAQLS scores are not strictly comparable between the CODs and the INTACTs, because they refer to the entire pre-adult life of the latter but only to the post-parental-divorce portion of that life for the former—an issue that we discuss below.

We used five adult outcome variables, two of which are naturally dichotomous and three of which are not. We collapsed the latter into dichotomies for some of the analyses (for comparability with the other data and because their distributions are at least somewhat skewed) but also did supplementary analyses with the uncollapsed data. Two of the variables are responses to questions that asked the respondents their degree of personal happiness and life satisfaction at the time of the survey, the dichotomous coding being “1” for “very happy” and “0” for lesser degrees of happiness and “1” for “very satisfied” and “0” for lesser degrees of satisfaction. (See Table 1 for the response distributions.) Two other adult outcome variables pertain only to the ever-married respondents and deal with the success of their first marriages. One is simply whether or not the respondent had ever divorced, “never-divorced” being coded “1” and “ever-divorced” coded “0.” The other is whether or not the respondent was in a first marriage and reported it to be “very happy,” a code of “1” indicating yes and a code of “0” indicating either that the first marriage had ended in divorce or was considered to be less than “very happy.” The survey failed to ask about the date of the first marriage, and therefore the duration of terminated marriages could not be included in the

analyses, and such techniques as Cox regression that require that information could not be used. The fifth and final adult outcome variable is whether or not the respondent was a college graduate, a code of “1” indicating yes and “0” no. We also dichotomized education in other ways, but analyses with the different ways of dichotomization revealed no important differences, and thus we report only the results for this one way.

CONTROL VARIABLES: Control variables include both mother’s and father’s education, each converted into a set of dummy variables (less than high school graduation, high school graduation but no college, some college, and college graduation), race (dummy variables for white, black, Asian, and other/mixed), ethnicity (Hispanic versus other), respondent’s date of birth, and, for the CODs, age when parents divorced. For some analyses with the CODs, we also controlled the respondent’s report of the parents’ pre-divorce marital happiness (“not too happy” versus happier) and degree of conflict (“a lot” versus less).

Analysis Plan

We conducted two sets of analyses, the first only with the CODs and the second including all or most of the INTACTs as well.

With the CODs we regressed (logistic regression in the case of the dichotomous or dichotomized dependent variables and ordinary least squares regression in the case of dependent variables having more than two possible values) each outcome variable on the Bad Divorce Index, first without control variables, then with background variables (including date of birth and age when parents divorced) controlled, and then with parents’ pre-divorce marital happiness and degree of conflict also controlled. The results of the logistic regression analyses are reported in Table 2* and those of the OLS regressions are available from the first author on request.

With the CODs and the INTACTs combined, we first did a conventional “effects-of-divorce” analysis in which the independent variable is the dichotomous parents-did-parents-did-not divorce, the results of which are reported in Table 3*. Then, with the CODs and most of the INTACTs we used

** Scholars seeking OLS regressions, Table 2, and Table 3 should contact Glenn’s co-investigator Elizabeth Marquardt at marquardt@americanvalues.org.*

as independent variables the six dummy variables described above, three for the CODs based on their Bad Divorce Scale scores and three for the INTACTs based on the reports they gave about their parents' marriages.

The reference category for these analyses was the good divorce, that is, a zero score on the Bad Divorce Scale. Again, we did both logistic and OLS regression analyses with the dependent variables that are not naturally dichotomous but report here only the logistic regression results. We report the results with the background variables (sans age when parents divorced) controlled in Figures 1 through 6.

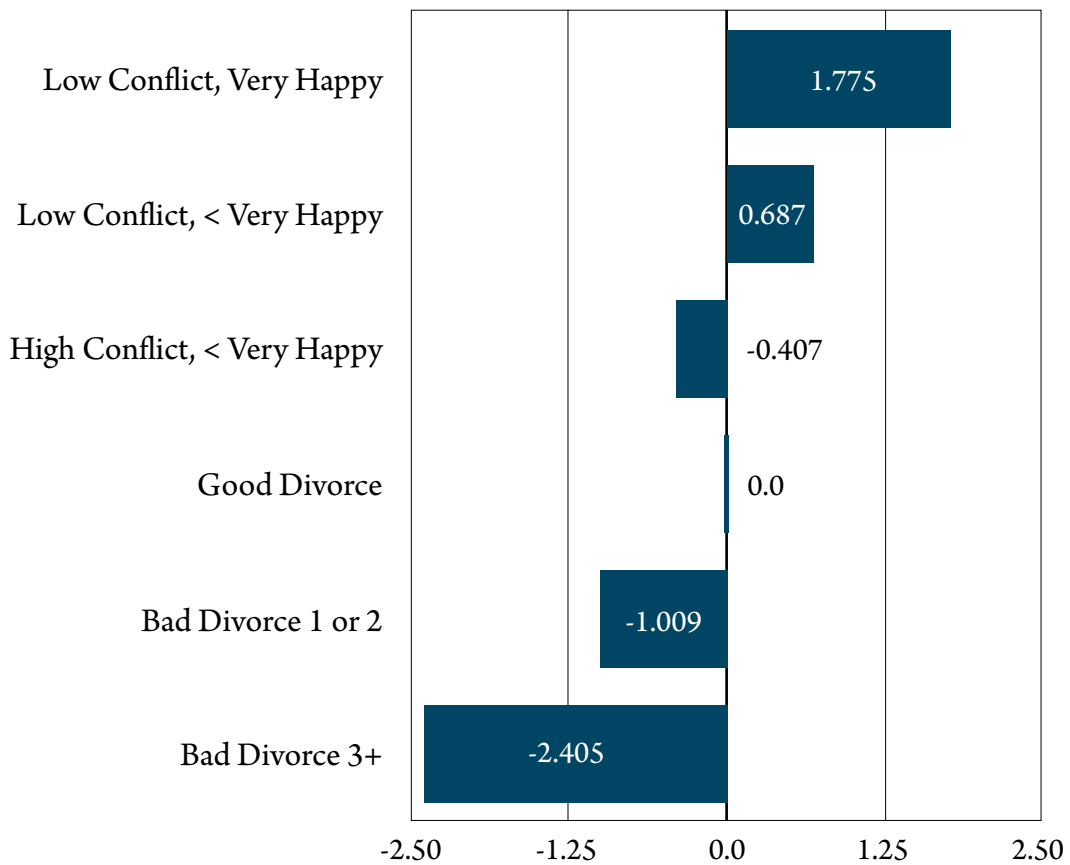
In view of the fact that the Pre-Adult Quality of Life Scale scores are not strictly comparable for the CODs and INTACTs, we restricted the analysis in which the PMS is the ID and the PAQLS is the DV to the CODs who spent at least ten years as pre-adults after their parents divorced, thus eliminating those who were likely to still be recovering from the short-term trauma of the divorce at the time of the survey. This restriction, which reduced but did not eliminate the incomparability, made little difference in the results—an indication that the remaining incomparability probably made little difference as well.

(It is important to point out that the instructions given to the COD respondents for the pre-adult quality of life questions were very clear that they should think about their entire pre-adult life after the parental divorce and not just the time right after the divorce. The wording is “The following statements concern your experience growing up in your family after the divorce, that is, the period that begins with your earliest memories of your parents' divorce and ends when you were eighteen years old. . . .”)

We ran all of the analyses first for males and females combined and then separately for each gender. The results were generally very similar for males and females, and thus we report in tabular and graphic form only the results for males and females combined. However, the results for the marriage-related variables are different enough by gender that we discuss the male-female differences.

Figure 1

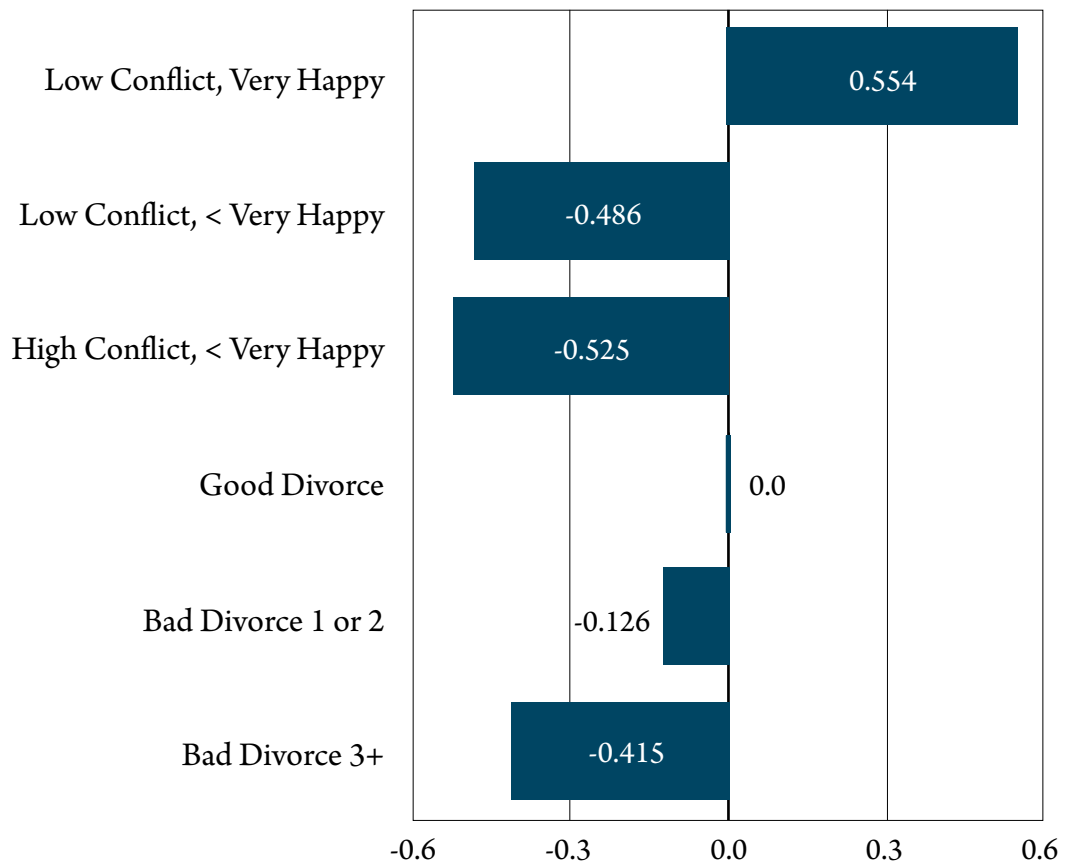
Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being above the median on the pre-adult quality of life scale on parents' marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled, persons whose parents divorced after they were age seven excluded



Note: The values for all other categories except “High Conflict, < Very Happy” are significantly different from the value for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

Figure 2

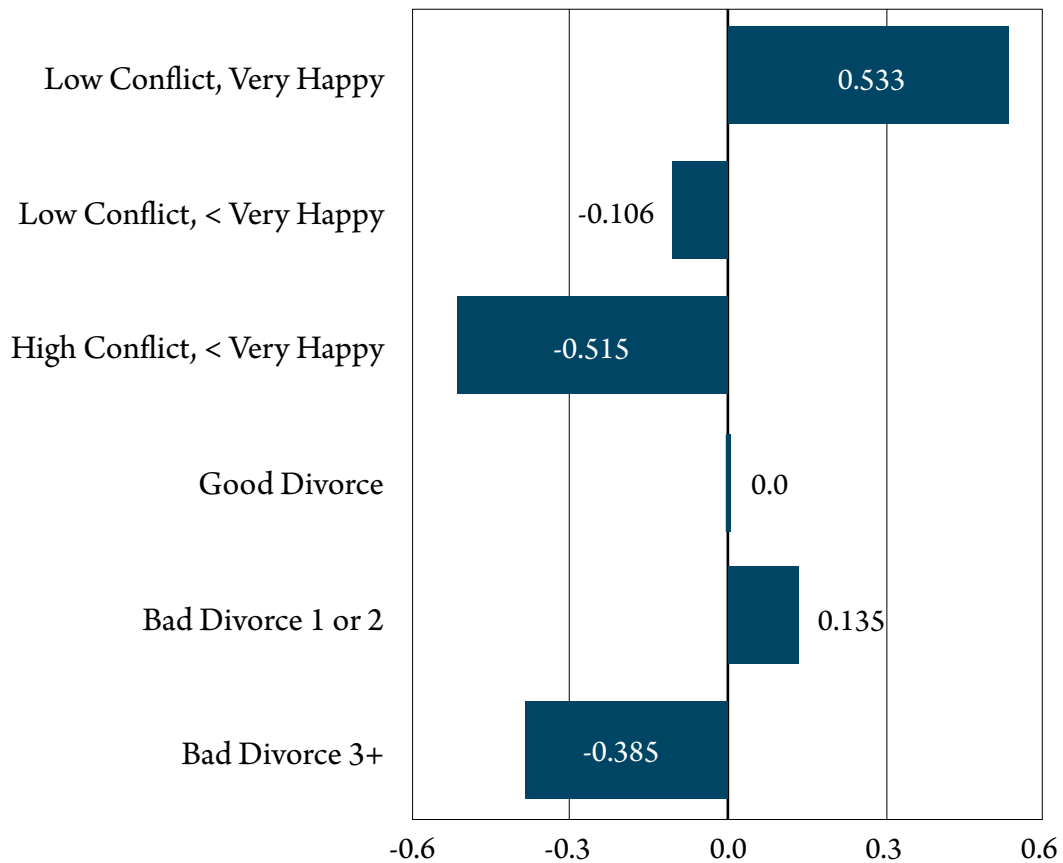
Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being personally “very happy” on parents’ marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled



Note: The values for all other categories except “Bad Divorce 1 or 2” are significantly different from the value for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

Figure 3

Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being personally “very satisfied” on parents’ marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled



Note: The values for “Low Conflict, Very Happy,” “High Conflict, < Very Happy,” and “Bad Divorce 3+” are significantly different from the value for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

Figure 4

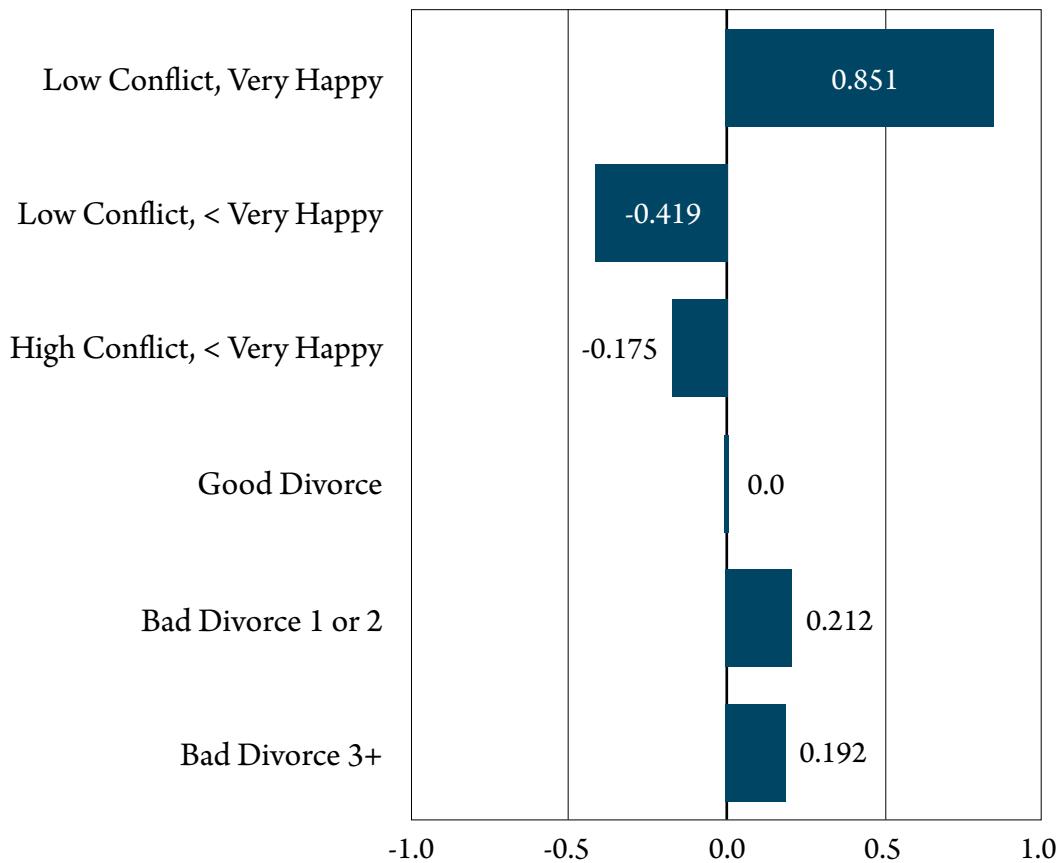
Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being never-divorced on parents' marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled, ever-married respondents only



Note: The values for “Low Conflict, Very Happy,” “Low Conflict, < Very Happy,” and “High Conflict, < Very Happy,” are significantly different from the value for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

Figure 5

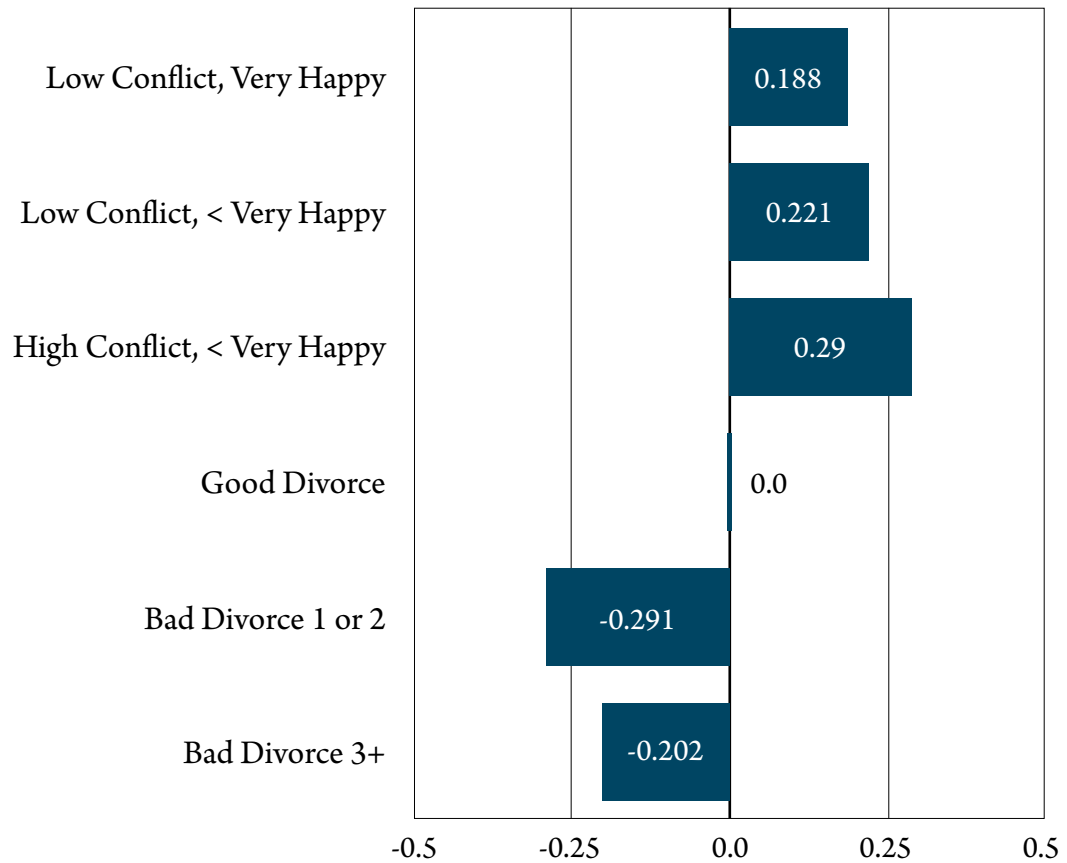
Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being in a “very happy” first marriage on parents’ marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled, ever-married respondents only



Note: The value for “Low Conflict, Very Happy” is significantly different from the value for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

Figure 6

Logistic regression (logistic regression coefficient) of being a college graduate on parents' marital situation (dummy variables – “good divorce” = reference category), background variables controlled



Note: No other value differs significantly from that for “Good Divorce” on a two-tailed test.

RESULTS

Estimated Effects of Quality of Divorce

The data in Table 2* provide a mixed picture of the apparent effects of bad parental divorces. The strongest estimated effects by far are negative and are on the pre-adult quality of life, as that is indicated by the PAQLS. The control variables do not account for an appreciable proportion of the bivariate relationship, and a similar OLS regression model with the PAQLS entered as a continuous variable yielded very similar estimates of strong effects. As we point out below, some portion of the relationship is probably spurious due to the common influence on the IV and DV of unmeasured parental characteristics. Nevertheless, the evidence is strong that divorcing parents can substantially harm their children's pre-adult well-being by engaging in destructive behaviors after the divorce.

The estimated effects of parental destructive behaviors on the adult psychological well-being (happiness and satisfaction) of their offspring are also negative and statistically significant though much smaller than the estimated effects on pre-adult well-being. The pre-adult and adult measures are not comparable, so the difference in the estimates does not prove that childhood and adolescent malaise produced by parental misconduct dissipates during young adulthood. However, that probably tends to happen. Again, the relationship between the IV and the DVs is likely to be partially spurious, so any lingering negative effects of bad parental divorces on young adult psychological well-being may be quite small.

More surprising, and thus potentially more important, is the lack of evidence that bad parental divorces have substantial negative effects on marital and educational outcomes.

There are no significant relationships between the Bad Divorce Scale and educational attainments shown in Table 2*, and no significant relationships emerge when education is dichotomized differently, say, no more than high school graduation versus more education. However, as is shown in Figure

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6, the relationship between the BDS and college graduation is not linear when the background variables are controlled, and respondents whose parents engaged in one or two destructive behaviors were significantly less likely to have completed college than those whose parents had good divorces. Therefore, bad parental divorces may have some negative effects on educational outcomes, although this study provides no evidence that they were substantial and linear.

The evidence concerning the effects of bad parental 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 (not shown in tabular form) show no statistically significant relationships for males but moderate statistically significant positive estimated effects of bad parental divorces on the marital outcomes of female offspring. The female logistic regression coefficients for the bivariate and the two kinds of partial relationships between the BDS and never-divorced are .156, .221, and .281, respectively, and for being in an intact “very happy” first marriage, the corresponding coefficients are .136, .173, and .237. All of these coefficients are statistically significant at the .05 level on a two-tailed test.

Estimated Effects of Divorce-Non-Divorce and of Six Kinds of Parental Marital Situations

The results of the conventional divorce-non-divorce analyses are generally as expected and consistent with similar findings from earlier studies. For instance, both the bivariate and partial relationships of the independent variable with the PAQLS are very strong and in the expected direction, and the relationships with adult happiness and satisfaction are also in the expected direction though rather weak. The INTACTs were considerably more likely to be college graduates than were the CODs—a difference not substantially reduced by the control of background variables—and among those who had married, the INTACTs were considerably more likely not to have divorced. The only unexpected finding is that there is virtually no indicated difference—with or without controls—in the proportion of the two kinds of ever-married respondents who were in intact “very happy” marriages. This latter finding, when considered along with the finding on divorce, of course means that the ever-married INTACTs were more likely than the ever-married CODs to be in intact first marriages that they reported to be less than “very happy.”

The results when the independent variables are the Parental Marital Situation dummy variables are generally quite complex, the exception being that the PAQLS values adjusted for the background variables vary almost monotonically from the highest quality intact parental marriages to the worst parental divorces (Figure 1). The only deviation from this monotonic pattern is that respondents whose parents had a good divorce seem to have had a slightly better pre-adult life than those whose parents had a low-quality, high-conflict marriage, but this difference is not statistically significant. Persons whose parents had the highest quality of divorce apparently fared much worse than those whose parents had a high-quality, low-conflict intact marriage and even fell short, by a statistically significant margin, of those who reported that their parents had a low-conflict but less than very happy intact marriage. Thus, the findings indicate that while a good divorce is distinctly better than a bad one in terms of the aspects of pre-adult life captured by the PAQLS, it only equals the worst of the intact marriages in its estimated effects.

The most striking aspect of the data on adult personal happiness and life satisfaction is that the big difference is between the respondents whose parents had high-quality, low-conflict intact marriages and everyone else (Figures 2 and 3). It is also notable that the estimated effects of very bad parental marriages and very bad parental divorces are very similar and distinctly negative. The apparent effects of low-conflict, less than very happy parental marriages are different for the two quality of life variables, being distinctly negative for happiness but not for life satisfaction. Thus, on these two outcome variables, the good divorce fares well in comparison with all kinds of intact parental marriages except the best ones, with which it fares very poorly.

The only thing that seems to matter much in terms of whether or not the ever-married respondents had divorced is whether or not their parents had divorced (Figure 4). On the other hand, the only thing that seems to matter much in terms of whether or not the ever-married respondents were in intact first marriages that they reported to be “very happy” is whether or not their parents were in high-quality, low-conflict intact marriages (Figure 5). These findings lead to the conclusion that kinds of parental marriages, including stable but mediocre ones, tend to be replicated in the next generation.

Although the data in Table 3* show a substantial and statistically significant estimated negative effect of parental divorce on college graduation, no other category differs significantly from the good divorce category in Figure 6. All categories of INTACTs rank above all categories of CODs, but within those two main divisions, the nature of the parental marriage seems to have made little difference on educational attainments.

DISCUSSION

At least one major caution is in order about interpreting the results of this study or of any similar cross-sectional study of children and divorce in which the data are analyzed in conventional ways, such as with OLS or logistic regression models. Even though several variables that could commonly affect the independent and dependent variables are controlled, the remaining IV-DV associations are likely to be partially spurious due to the common effects of unmeasured parental characteristics, such as empathetic ability, emotional stability, altruistic tendencies, and similar qualities that should contribute both to stable and high quality marriages and to positive child outcomes. (See D'Onofrio et al., 2007, for evidence that the relevant parental characteristics include genetic ones.) Parental conflict has been estimated to reduce the quality of parenting (Buehler & Gerard, 2002), but pre-existing parental characteristics are likely to contribute to both marital conflict and poor parenting. Although this study indicates that the offspring of parents who have stable, high quality marriages fare much better than other persons on all of the outcomes studied except for educational attainment, this study and similar ones probably overestimate the magnitude of the positive effects of good parental marriages. Likewise, this study almost certainly overestimates the positive effects of good divorces, because the parents able and willing to refrain from destructive post-divorce behaviors are almost certainly, on average, better parents in other ways than those who handle their post-divorce relationships irresponsibly. This caveat does not mean that there can be any reasonable doubt that good divorces are better for the pre-adult quality of life of children than bad ones, but it does mean that the magnitude of the benefits of good divorces is uncertain. And it also means that the evidence for positive effects

** Scholars seeking OLS regressions, Table 2 and Table 3 should contact Glenn's co-investigator Elizabeth Marquardt at marquardt@americanvalues.org.*

of good divorces on the adult psychological well-being of offspring is rather weak.

Another needed caution is that the average effects estimated by this study may conceal wide variations in effects among different individuals and different kinds of individuals (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). Especially when the estimated effects are rather weak, a small percentage of the studied respondents could account for them. Aside from doing separate analyses for males and females, we did not systematically look for interactions with our independent variables, and indeed we lacked measures of many of the variables likely to be involved in such interactions. Specifying the conditions under which the effects estimated here seem to occur must await further research.

The lack of evidence that good 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. More important, however, may be 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, which good divorces as operationally defined here can do little to prevent or offset, may be the main reason that CODs have lower average educational attainments than INTACTs. An example of such diversion would be the divorced father who acquires stepchildren through remarriage and who, because of the influence of the new wife, gives more college financial assistance to his stepchildren than to his biological children from his previous marriage.

The lack of evidence that good divorces contribute to good offspring marriages is equally surprising, if only because parents who avoid destructive post-separation behaviors model better relationship skills than do other divorced parents. Especially surprising is the estimated positive effect of bad parental divorces on the marital success of the female CODs. As with any counter-intuitive finding from one study, this one 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 the 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 amicable divorce, offspring may be more inclined to lose confidence in the institution of marriage 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 rather than on the institution of marriage, but if good persons with good relationship skills cannot make a marriage work, there is little reason to be optimistic about having a good marriage. And there are theoretical reasons for thinking (Glenn, 1991; 1996), and some empirical evidence indicating (Amato & Rogers, 1999), 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, and 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. Indeed, parents in low-conflict marriages who divorce do seem to have unusually favorable attitudes toward divorce (Booth & Amato, 2001).

An important recent debate concerns whether parents in a low-conflict but mediocre marriage can better serve their children by staying married or by divorcing. There is evidence that in some respects the offspring of parents in good enough marriages can benefit from the parents staying married, at least until the offspring reach adulthood (Amato & Booth, 1997). The evidence from our study that pertains to this issue is not the best available, because our research is retrospective rather than prospective and because some of our adult outcome variables are not as sophisticated as those used in some other research. Nevertheless, it is important that our results are mixed on this issue, being consistent with the “stay-married” position in regard to pre-adult quality of life, educational attainment, and marital permanence (although one can argue that the evidence on the latter is not meaningful unless marital quality is taken into account) and consistent with the “get-a-divorce” (assuming a good divorce) position in regard to adult personal happiness and being in a “very happy” intact first marriage. The evidence does not clearly support either position in regard to adult life satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PERSONAL DECISIONS

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 highly pathological marriages should be to improve the marriage if there is any reasonable prospect of success in that endeavor. The findings of this study have no clear implications for what parents should do about their marriage if that goal is unattainable, but if a divorce occurs, no one should assume that the parents' avoiding clearly destructive behaviors will by itself prevent or substantially reduce all of the major negative consequences on offspring of the parental separation and its aftermath. The parents and the professionals who work with the “children of divorce” should not let confidence in the efficacy of good divorces divert attention from other means to promote such outcomes as the educational and marital success of the CODs. The means we have in mind—such as including provisions for financing college educations in divorce settlements and encouraging marriage and relationship education for CODs—are already being employed to some extent, but complacency about the effects of divorce and its aftermath on children, which could be an unintended consequence of good divorce promotion, may impede the needed expansion in their employment.

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