

Beating a Legacy of Marital Failure

When a family breaks up, what happens to the children?

Divorce is a tragedy. It often devastates the couple involved, and worrying about the children is an added burden. There are short-term concerns, like schoolwork, social behavior, and the stress of going back and forth between households.



But even worse are the long-term questions. Will they repeat my mistakes? Are their marriages doomed to end in divorce also? Common wisdom and a lot of research would tell us that, yes, children of divorce are much more likely to divorce when they grow up.

But I came across a research study that should give some hope to divorced dads who are worried about their kids' future. A team of researchers from Iowa State University found that though a legacy of divorce is a significant and challenging factor, there are other factors involved, like the quality of the one-on-one relationships with their parents after the divorce. The researchers believe that our children will learn much about relationships through their daily interactions with us as well as by watching the way we handle our marriages.

Now, there appear to be some limitations in this study. They observed teenagers over a span of about eight years as they related to their parents and in their own romantic relationships. The next twenty or thirty years will really tell the tale. And I've spoken with many divorced people who discover that they are, in many ways, following in their parents' footsteps.

On the other hand, I do agree that fathers can overcome some of the long-term consequences of a divorce by cultivating a close connection with their children and

giving them lots of practice at communicating in healthy ways—whether it's simply expressing feelings, giving affirmation, resolving conflicts, and so on.

Now, let's get back to what I said in the beginning: divorce is a tragedy, and has numerous negative outcomes. The situations where divorce is the best option are rare. However, living as we do in a world where people make mistakes and are sometimes guided by selfish choices, we need to recognize that families do split up.

So, if you're a divorced dad, don't be overwhelmed or give up. All is not lost! Through your warmth, encouragement, and open communication with your kids, you can increase the odds that they'll avoid repeating your heartache