

The Top Ten Myths of Divorce

May 8, 2002

by David Popenoe

- 1 Because people learn from their bad experiences, second marriages tend to be more successful than first marriages.

Although many people who divorce have successful subsequent marriages, the divorce rate of remarriages is in fact higher than that of first marriages.¹

- 2 Living together before marriage is a good way to reduce the chances of eventually divorcing.

Many studies have found that those who live together before marriage have a considerably higher chance of eventually divorcing. The reasons for this are not well understood. In part, the type of people who are willing to cohabit may also be those who are more willing to divorce. There is some evidence that the act of cohabitation itself generates attitudes in people that are more conducive to divorce, for example the attitude that relationships are temporary and easily can be ended.²

- 3 Divorce may cause problems for many of the children who are affected by it, but by and large these problems are not long lasting and the children recover relatively quickly.

Divorce increases the risk of interpersonal problems in children. There is evidence, both from small qualitative studies and from large-scale, long-term empirical studies, that many of these problems are long lasting. In fact, they may even become worse in adulthood.³

- 4 Having a child together will help a couple to improve their marital satisfaction and prevent a divorce.

Many studies have shown that the most stressful time in a marriage is after the first child is born. Couples who have a child together have a slightly decreased risk of divorce compared to couples without children, but the decreased risk is far less than it used to be when parents with marital problems were more likely to stay together “for the sake of the children.”⁴

- 5 Following divorce, the woman’s standard of living plummets by seventy three percent while that of the man’s improves by forty two percent.

This dramatic inequity, one of the most widely publicized statistics from the social sciences, was later found to be based on a faulty calculation. A reanalysis of the data determined that the woman’s loss was twenty seven percent while the man’s gain was ten percent. Irrespective of the magnitude of the differences, the gender gap is real and seems not to have narrowed much in recent decades.⁵

- 6 When parents don't get along, children are better off if their parents divorce than if they stay together.

A recent large-scale, long-term study suggests otherwise. While it found that parents' marital unhappiness and discord have a broad negative impact on virtually every dimension of their children's well-being, so does the fact of going through a divorce. In examining the negative impacts on children more closely, the study discovered that it was only the children in very high conflict homes who benefited from the conflict removal that divorce may bring. In lower-conflict marriages that end in divorce—and the study found that perhaps as many as two thirds of the divorces were of this type—the situation of the children was made much worse following a divorce. Based on the findings of this study, therefore, except in the minority of high-conflict marriages it is better for the children if their parents stay together and work out their problems than if they divorce.⁶

- 7 Because they are more cautious in entering marital relationships and also have a strong determination to avoid the possibility of divorce, children who grow up in a home broken by divorce tend to have as much success in their own marriages as those from intact homes.

Marriages of the children of divorce actually have a much higher rate of divorce than the marriages of children from intact families. A major reason for this, according to a recent study, is that children learn about marital commitment or permanence by observing their parents. In the children of divorce, the sense of commitment to a lifelong marriage has been undermined.⁷

- 8 Following divorce, the children involved are better off in stepfamilies than in single-parent families.

The evidence suggests that stepfamilies are no improvement over single-parent families, even though typically income levels are higher and there is a father figure in the home. Stepfamilies tend to have their own set of problems, including interpersonal conflicts with new parent figures and a very high risk of family breakup.⁸

- 9 Being very unhappy at certain points in a marriage is a good sign that the marriage will eventually end in divorce.

All marriages have their ups and downs. Recent research using a large national sample found that eighty six percent of people who were unhappily married in the late 1980s, and stayed with the marriage, indicated when interviewed five years later that they were happier. Indeed, three fifths of the formerly unhappily married couples rated their marriages as either "very happy" or "quite happy."⁹

- 10 It is usually men who initiate divorce proceedings

Two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by women. One recent study found that many of the reasons for this have to do with the nature of our divorce laws. For example, in most states women have a good chance of receiving custody of their children.

Because women more strongly want to keep their children with them, in states where there is a presumption of shared custody with the husband the percentage of women who initiate divorces is much lower.¹⁰ Also, the higher rate of women initiators is probably due to the fact that men are more likely to be "badly behaved." Husbands, for example, are more likely than wives to have problems with drinking, drug abuse, and infidelity.

David Popenoe

Sources

1 Joshua R. Goldstein, "The Leveling of Divorce in the United States" *Demography* 36 (1999): 409-414; Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)

2 Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao, "Premartial Cohabitation and Marital Instability in the United States: A Reassessment" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992): 178-190; Pamela J. Smock, "Cohabitation in the United States" *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000)

3 Judith Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); Andrew J. Cherlin, P. Lindsay Chase-Landsdale, and Christine McRae, "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course" *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998): 239-249; Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)

4 Tim B. Heaton, "Marital Stability Throughout the Child-rearing Years" *Demography* 27 (1990): 55-63; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, "Children and Marital Disruption" *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991): 930-953; Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples* (New York: Basic Books, 1992)

5 Leonore J. Weitzman, "The Economics of Divorce: Social and Economic Consequences of Property, Alimony, and Child Support Awards" *UCLA Law Review* 28 (August, 1981): 1251; Richard R. Peterson, "A Re-Evaluation of the Economic Consequences of Divorce" *American Sociological Review* 61 (June, 1996): 528-536; Pamela J. Smock, "The Economic Costs of Marital Disruption for Young Women over the Past Two Decades" *Demography* 30 (August, 1993): 353-371 [back to text]

6 Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)

7 Paul R. Amato, "What Children Learn From Divorce" *Population Today*, (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, January 2001); Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Beyond the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce" *Journal of Family Issues* 21-8 (2000): 1061-1086

8 Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Alan Booth and Judy Dunn (eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994)

9 Unpublished research by Linda J. Waite, cited in Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 148

10 Margaret F. Brinig and Douglas A. Allen, "These Boots Are Made For Walking": Why Most Divorce Filers Are Women" *American Law and Economics Review* 2-1 (2000): 126-169

(c) David Popenoe, 2001, published for the National Marriage Project. Republished by permission of the author.

David Popenoe is Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he is also Co-Director of the National Marriage Project and former social and behavioral sciences dean.