

Divorce: The Bigger Picture

By Brett A. Magbee

In 1963 I heard the word "divorce" for the first time. A boy in my fifth-grade class was experiencing it with his parents. At the time, I couldn't think of anything more horrible than having your parents live apart. I thought about it a lot that school year.

Now 37 years later, divorce is commonplace. More than one million American children will be impacted this year by a parent's decision to break the marriage vows. Over eight million children currently live with a divorced single parent.

Since January, six couples I know have filed papers for divorce or are planning to. All have children under the age of 18. These are parents intent on providing every conceivable opportunity for their children from sports to ballet, piano to summer camp - all in an effort to present their precious progeny with every positive experience of American life. As such, you would think divorce would be an unacceptable option. For the impact on children in divorced families is a negative one.

In a new Heritage Foundation paper, "The Effects of Divorce on America" (www.heritage.org), Patrick Fagan and Robert Rector find that children of divorced parents are increasingly the victims of abuse and neglect; experience greater health, behavioral and emotional problems; have increased criminal activity and drug and alcohol use; have higher rates of suicide; have diminished learning capacity and higher dropout rates; have more destructive ways of handling conflict; have poorer self-image;

are more inclined to be sexually promiscuous; are less inclined to continue religious worship; and have a greater tendency to divorce as adults.

Psychologist Judith Wallerstein found that 15 years after divorce, 80 percent of divorced mothers and 50 percent of divorced fathers felt that the divorce was beneficial, while only 10 percent of the children felt positive about it. As a result an emotional distance often develops between parent and child which lasts into adulthood. In her studies, Wallerstein found that even a decade later, children were anxious about their own chances of having a happy marriage.

There are real backdoor costs associated with the ease and availability of divorce. A U.S. longitudinal study tracked 6,400 boys over a period of 20 years (into adulthood) and found that children without biological fathers in the home are three times more likely to commit a crime leading to incarceration. Gang involvement, delinquency and drug use are higher for children of divorced families and have huge financial costs for society. The family pays too: nearly 50 percent of households with children move into poverty following divorce.

Federal and state governments spend \$150 billion per year to subsidize and aid single-parent families. Compare this to only \$150 million spent to strengthen marriage. In other words, for every \$1,000 spent to deal

with the effects of family disintegration, only \$1 is spent to prevent that disintegration.

Some positive steps are being taken. A number of Texas cities, including Austin, Abilene, Tyler, Dallas and El Paso have adopted "Community Marriage Policies" through the help of a ministry called Marriage Savers (www.marriagesavers.org). This ministry, founded in 1996, helps equip local communities, principally through local congregations, to help men and women to prepare for lifelong marriage, strengthen existing marriages, and restore troubled marriages. Results from adopting a Community Marriage Policy are already being seen. For example, El Paso divorces fell from 3,176 to 2,179; Austin saw a drop of 2% in one year.


We must address this as an economic issue as well as a cultural issue of top priority. Otherwise, the strongest pillar of our society, the American family, could be weakened beyond repair, leading the next generation into abject social decay. Legislative leadership is in order.

Some of Fagan's and Rector's recommendations at the federal level include: creating a public health campaign to inform Americans of the risks associated with divorce; giving a one-time tax credit to always-married couples when their youngest children reach 18, offsetting the current marriage penalty in the tax code. At the state level, Fagan and Rector recommend: requiring married couples with minor children to complete divorce education and a mediated co-partnering plan before filing for divorce; making the Covenant Marriage option available to engaged couples, lengthening the process for obtaining a divorce by two years; and ending "no-fault" divorce for parents with children under age 18. In a Covenant Marriage, couples are bound by force of law to a marriage contract that lengthens the process for obtaining a divorce by two years, thus applying a brake on

the divorce. Louisiana and Arizona have enacted Covenant Marriage laws, and three other states (Oklahoma, Oregon, and Texas) have come close.¹ In "no fault" divorce, either partner can end the marriage simply by petitioning for the divorce. This "reform" was introduced on the grounds that assigning "fault" caused greater hostility and division in the divorce proceedings.²

Not every divorced parent is responsible for a marriage ending. And not every child of a divorced family will experience the consequences noted earlier. But the odds are far greater than most parents realize that there will be long-term negative consequences for a child growing up in a broken home. It causes me to wonder: what will become of the fourteen children of the six couples I know who are unable to see the bigger picture?

Brett A. Magbee is Executive Director of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs (OCPA). This article was originally published in OCPA's monthly publication Perspective, July 2000, Volume 7, Number 7.



Another recommended title that can be purchased in
 in
TPPF's Online Public Policy Bookstore at:

www.tppf.org/amazon.html

¹ *The Effects of Divorce on America*, Patrick F. Fagan and Robert Rector, The Heritage Backgrounder, No. 1373, June 5, 2000.

² Ibid.

Margaret Thatcher to Speak at TPPF 12th Anniversary Dinner

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has accepted an invitation to speak at the TPPF 12th Anniversary dinner in **Houston, Texas** on **February 15th, 2001**. Lady Thatcher has conveyed her intention to curtail her public speaking activities after her 2001 speaking commitments. Subsequently, this likely will be her last public appearance in Houston and in Texas after this tour concludes. With a newly inaugurated U.S. President, her speech will be especially timely.

TPPF has reserved the entire ballroom at the Post Oak Doubletree Hotel in Houston for the evening of February 15th. Formal invitations will be sent in the coming months.

Mark Your Calenders For This Historic Event!

For ticket information call (713) 526-3399.