

## The Children of Divorce

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(Photo: Liz Banfield Photography)

It's been 30 years since the peak of America's "divorce boom." Later this week, MPR's Sasha Aslanian looks at how the kids of divorce have turned out. She has some insight; she's one of them.

"I have two bedrooms, I bragged to other kids," Aslanian says in the hour-long documentary. "I bristled at hearing the term *broken home*. It wasn't until much later, in adulthood, that I laid down my guard a little bit." When she looked around her book club one night and found most of them were children of the divorce boom, she pressed ahead with her project.

"I thought it was like teams. And we were part of the losing team. And we got dumped by the captain," one woman says, recalling her parents' divorce.

Aslanian interviews her dad, who recalls the day the divorce became final, and even tracks down the divorce court mediator who processed the divorce like so many cattle in a stockyard. He turns out not to be mean and uncaring, and recalls that he often got calls from the children of divorcing parents.



Back in the early '70s, some pop psychologists of the day opined that "staying together" for the sake of the kids would do them more harm than good, granting permission for them to walk away from bad marriages.

We know more now.

"It's one of the few issues in our society where what's best for the parents is not necessarily best for the children," says Dr. Judith Wallerstein, who studied the kids from the divorce boom and produced a book about it in 2000, when [Salon.com](#) looked at the issue:

*When a parent dies, a child suffers loss. With divorce, says Wallerstein, a child must cope not only with loss but with failure: "Even if the young person decides as an adult that the divorce was necessary, that in fact the parents had little in common to begin with," she writes, "the divorce still represents failure -- failure to keep the man or the woman, failure to maintain the relationship, failure to be faithful, or failure to stick around. This failure in turn shapes the child's inner template of self and family. If they failed, I can fail, too."*

*As a result, some of the children of divorce whose lives Wallerstein has followed (their average age at the latest interviews was 33) have grown up to be pathological commitment-phobes, expecting all relationships to end in disaster and pain. Others, going to the opposite extreme, have rushed into reckless, spur-of-the-moment, almost invariably doomed marriages in their late teens or early 20s, or selected clearly inadequate partners who are too weak and needy to leave. Even those who are happily married remain haunted by fear of abandonment and have trouble dealing with any disagreement or conflict.*

That's the sort of talk Aslanian hated when she was a kid, though she acknowledged "it felt like the sky was falling" the day the divorce was announced.

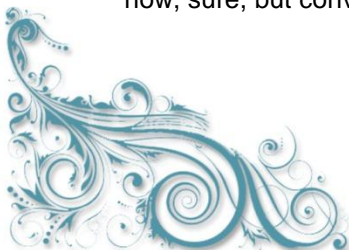
The documentary tracks down the authors of "The Kids' Book of Divorce," written in 1979 by the kids at Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, Mass. One didn't confront his parents about the divorce until years later. He chose not to marry the woman with whom he has a son. Another had a long-term relationship in her 30s that didn't lead to marriage, followed by a marriage at age 40.

What's the effect of divorce on kids when *they* have relationships years later? "The bad news is that you really are much more likely to get divorced as an adult if your parents divorced, and parental divorce really does affect almost every aspect of future relationships," according to [Nick Wolfinger](#), a sociologist who studies divorce and has a formula for kids of divorce:

*"If you want to stay married, marry someone just like you, except if you're from a divorced family, marry someone from an intact family."*

For the record, Sasha Aslanian has been married for nearly 10 years to a man who does not come from a background of divorce. They dated for 12 years.

A segment of the documentary looks at what we've learned about the effect of divorce on kids. We're smarter now, sure, but conversations with today's kids reveal heartbreaking tales of kids still being stuck in the middle.





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Hennepin County, for example, once funded mandatory programs for parents and children going through divorce, but those days are over and without the requirement, enrollment has dwindled. Aslanian tried to follow some of the kids in a class she visited three years ago, and found most had moved. One girl, now 13, whom she was able to follow, has gained a stepmother, a stepbrother, and a half brother. Her father says he and his ex-wife are better friends now than when they were married. He admits there's pain that comes with a blended family, "but there's more people to love the kids," he says.

That's known as a "good divorce." It comes partly from 30 years of doing it badly. Yet the question from the height of the divorce book is still relevant: What's best for the kids?

"I'm not advocating for loveless marriages," [Elizabeth Marquardt](#), director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values. "But it's also the case that marriage doesn't make us happy every day. No marriage does, but your marriage serves as so much more than just a vehicle for immediate individual adult needs. It makes one world for your child, and children will tell you that means everything to them."

Aslanian says she started the project five years ago to show how kids "aren't all messed up." Then she realized the real story is "how deep this stuff cuts. The past stays with us as a cautionary tale. I still believe in love, even for divorced kids."

*The documentary airs on MPR's Midday at noon on Wednesday.*

