

Divorce so often means broken promises, wrecked relationships and broken children. However the real answer to human happiness is not fiddling about with new laws, but teaching people how to stay in love. We need to encourage better partner choice, stronger relationships, and early access to expert help, bringing practical compassion not judgement. Ten years ago any politician that talked about "family values" was ridiculed as a right wing extremist. Now everyone is doing it. John Major and Tony Blair both see family life as centre stage, without which society will perish. (Article written in 1996)

They are right. Do we really want another forty years' trends like the last, until every child is in a broken home, every relationship ends in conflict? "Quickie divorce" is a terrible curse which has reduced lifelong marriage to nothing more than a twelve week contract to be together.

Three out of four [divorces](#) take place in this savage way, citing adultery or unreasonable behaviour, often before custody of children and property allocation has been decided. And then the war begins, perhaps followed by regrets. Half of all parents who lose custody wish they had never got divorced. And some who win their children also have second thoughts, but not soon enough.

Time for reconciliation with professional help is essential. If that fails, then mediation should make for a more civilised parting. Courts are the worst places to work out personal conflicts. They are also hideously expensive.

There is growing government panic over soaring divorce costs. Legal aid alone came to £178 million last year, just part of £9 billion spent helping people cope with the aftershocks of freedom - enough to pay for 10,000 primary schools or a quarter of the health service. Mediation could save £100 million by making an army of lawyers redundant. And helping [marriages](#) recover saves other costs too - for example some of the £1 billion we spend on children in care.

Divorce can be hell itself, with four times the risk of needing psychiatric help, being depressed, or being off work. Doctor's surgeries are full of people who can't eat, can't sleep, can't concentrate or are physically ill because their [marriages](#) are on the rocks.

People say that divorce is the answer to such unhappiness: it brings release, freedom, escape from tyranny, oppression, despair, violence and abuse. "Better a good divorce than a bad marriage". But as Relate points out, divorce tends to replace one set of problems with another, especially where kids are involved.

More than a million children today are paying a far higher price than we ever realised, and it has taken a broken generation for us to come to our senses. We now know that children from divorced homes are four times as likely to have problems with behaviour, nightmares, bedwetting, and stomach pains. They do worse in the classroom and are more prone to depression.

They are more likely to leave home early or run away, to leave school with no qualifications. They are more likely to get into early relationships, to get pregnant as teenagers, to marry early and then get divorced.

Remarriage often makes things worse for children, especially if other children are involved or a new partner tries to take the place of an absent parent. Abused children are ten times more likely to be in step-parenting homes than the national average.

Where children have experienced several break-ups they are ten times as likely to have severe behavioural problems. The emotional damage is long lasting. In late middle age they are still more likely to have major breakdowns than those from stable homes.

Partners can separate and divorce if they chose, but you can never divorce your children and they are a constant reminder of the relationship; a living expression, a fusion of two minds, personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Genetic identity is stronger than any other human tie.

I've sat in court on a Judge's bench listening to case after case of parents bickering over children. Access can be a nightmare. Two hours a week can never replace ongoing chat and friendship. It is almost unheard of for a child to spend a single night in the home of the estranged parent. Visits are often painful. Many children are effectively orphaned of the love, care and affection of one parent after divorce.

In America, judges have been telling parents to sit and listen to their own children, with counsellors present, to hear in their own words what divorce has been for them. The results

have been devastating.

Research shows many divorcing parents have an emotional blind spot, a defensive mechanism which prevents them seeing the full impact on their offspring. And children often try hard not to let it show.

Most parents getting divorced tell themselves that it will help their children. They ignore recent research which shows that children are likely to be better off in a marriage which is unhappy than in a split home, unless there is physical or abuse. Divorce is also a fast route to poverty.

It is easy to think in darker moments that almost every marriage is unhappy yet half of all [marriages](#) last a lifetime. Millions of people are finding genuine love, security, affection and friendship in stable relationships that in many cases have sustained them throughout several decades.

And millions of their children have enjoyed growing up in secure homes with their own mum and dad who cared for each other deeply and respected each other too. THESE are the couples we should be looking at. These are the ones who are managing to work it out. Far too many people say it's just a matter of luck. "For some it works out but for others it just doesn't". That is nonsense. Hundreds of research papers have shown us how to help predict before marriage which couples are likely to get divorced, and which will probably stay together.

Long term relationships are back in fashion in an era of AIDS and uncertainty. Survey after survey has shown that a great sex life has more to do with affection than technique - and love is meaningless without commitment, faithfulness, loyalty, long term friendship and support.

These are the things we should be teaching our children. People need to learn how to be happily married rather than rely on more legal changes to divorce.

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