

NATION

Study details divorce's lasting effects 25 years after their parents' breakup, children still suffer consequences

By Elizabeth Fernandez
SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

SAN FRANCISCO — Childhoods spent in unhappy solitude, adolescence roiled by drug and alcohol abuse, adulthood compromised — those are the stark legacies for children of divorce, according to a study released yesterday.

The study could alter society's basic perceptions on the effect of divorce, finding that a full quarter-century after their parents' divorce, children remain emotionally troubled.

Haunted by lingering memories of the divorce and hurtful aftermath, the children shy away from intimacy, are mistrustful of marriage, and fear starting families of their own.

Half of those studied got deeply involved with drugs and alcohol.

One-third ended their education with high school.

While others continued their education and entered the working world, they did not match their parents' earning levels.

Their overall trend: downward. The study, co-written by Judith Wallerstein, a psychologist and renowned researcher on divorce, provides disturbing documentation on the consequences of divorce over the course of 25 years on children of 60 middle- and upper-middle-class families from Marin County, Calif.

"Our jury is no longer out," Miss Wallerstein writes. "The children who were rendered mute by the system have returned to give us their verdict."

Her findings coincide with a gathering this week in San Francisco of authorities on children's issues, called the Second World Congress on Family Law and the Rights of Children and Youth.

In a plea to the nation's legal sys-

tem, Miss Wallerstein and co-author Julia Lewis, a psychology professor at San Francisco State University, said children's voices must be heard in shaping post-divorce decisions and economic safeguards established for them.

"Divorce needs to be looked at as an ongoing effect that lasts far longer than decisions about custody, visitation and such," said Miss Lewis. "Parenting fell away for many years in many families."

In their report, the researchers said the effect of divorce hits children in a critically different way than their parents.

"Unlike the adult experience, the child's suffering does not reach its peak at the breakup and then level off," they wrote. "On the contrary. Divorce is a cumulative ex-

perience for the child. Its impact increases over time."

Miss Wallerstein started her study when divorce rates were sharply rising, an era, she says, when divorce was viewed as a "transient, minor upheaval in the life of a child."

The new report traces divorce's effects upon 26 very young lives — children who were 2 to 6 years old when their parents broke up. This group, the researchers say, was the most vulnerable, the one that spent the longest time living with the fallout of divorce.

For the most part, their parents divorced in a relatively amicable manner. Nevertheless, the small children, who now are from 27 to 32 years old, bear stark emotional scars.

At the time of the breakup, these young kids felt raw terror, fear of abandonment, even of starving.

"There was no transition, no cushioning of the blow," Miss Wallerstein wrote. "Their loneliness, their sense that no one was there to take care of them, was overwhelming. . . . Such are the core memories of these adults, 25 years later."

Half the youths became seriously involved with drugs and alcohol. Many of the children, especially girls, started sexual activity in early adolescence.

While numerous fathers held degrees in law, medicine and business and had well-paying jobs, not one father provided full financial support through college. Indeed, a

quarter refused financial help at all once their children turned 18.

Altogether, more than half the children wound up with less education than their parents.

"The majority, at the end of their educational careers, entered the workplace with less education, less training, and consequently, less economic and social preparation than that of their parents at the same age," the study found.

"What is notable is they are very, very anxious about marriage, fidelity," Miss Lewis said. "They don't trust their own picture of marriage."

They remember how unhappy one or both of their parents were, they remember the infidelity, the depression and sadness. It doesn't prevent them from entering relationships, but it infuses the relationship.

In their study, the researchers decry a legal system that fails to protect children who are "invisible and voiceless." They said that when parents divide their property, a trust fund for the child's education should be started.