Adult Children of High-Conflict Marriages

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Most of us have probably heard someone declare that they had remained in their marriage “for the sake of the kids.” Research suggests, however, that logic may not hold up. In the long run, children whose parents are in high-conflict marriages may not be any better off than children whose parents divorce. While divorce has been shown to create significant negative outcomes for many children over the course of their lives, new research shows that conflict in marriage can have lasting effects into adulthood as well (Amato and Afifi, 2006).

Researchers from Penn State University compared adult children of low-conflict and high-conflict intact marriages and adult children of divorce. They found that adult children of high-conflict marriages had poorer relations with parents, experienced lower self-esteem, and reported less happiness or satisfaction in key life areas than those adult children from low-conflict marriage or divorce. Even as adults, the children from high-conflict marriages felt caught between their parents—forced to choose sides in a hostile environment. Both sons and daughters of high-conflict marriages had weaker ties with their parents as a result of their parents’ conflict (Amato and Afifi, 2006).

Surprisingly, adult children of divorce felt less “caught in the middle” than those who had chronically conflicted parents who did not divorce. The researchers conclude that “unlike...
children of divorce, children with parents in conflicted marriages (who do not divorce) may be unable to escape from their parents’ marital problems – even into adulthood” (Amato and Afifi, 2006, p. 222).

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