

Should Parents Stay Together For Their Kids?

<http://wcco.com/specialreports/divorce.together.kids.2.1007282.html> (also see video at this website)

Frank Vascellaro & Amelia Santaniello , (Minneapolis) WCCO-TV, May 11, 2009

Frank Vascellaro and Amelia Santaniello have examined a lot of tough parenting questions but, let's face it, "How to get the kids to stop whining" is minor compared to the gut-wrenching question, "Should parents stay together for their kids?" They spoke with an expert and you might be surprised by what he said.

Our coworker David Moldenhauer got divorced a few years ago. For him, seven years of marriage ended in a matter of days.

"We talked about it for about a week," said Moldenhauer. "She made her arguments for, I made my arguments against, and her arguments outweighed mine."

Caught in the middle of it was Moldenhauer's daughter who is now 11.

"She told my ex-wife that she knew that it wasn't her fault," said Moldenhauer. "So we didn't try to convince her of that. And it wasn't her fault. It's never the children's fault."

Moldenhauer told us how his ex-wife found pictures hidden in his daughter's room. She had drawn pictures of the whole family together again. That's the sort of thing that still bothers Moldenhauer and makes him wonder what would have happened if he and his ex had slowed things down.

"I don't know if it would have done any good," said Moldenhauer. "And I mean that, I really don't know."

"Some polls indicate that most people, looking back, wish they had worked harder to save their marriage," said Dr. William Doherty, a professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. He's one of our main sources for parenting information.

For a long time now, Doherty has been bothered by therapists who don't really care if a marriage made it or not. Three years ago, he stopped complaining and co-founded [Marriage Friendly Therapists](#), a national online registry of experienced therapists who want to help save marriages, if it's possible.

Doherty thinks any marriage can end in divorce. He said the way to fail is to start focusing on your needs and how they're not being met.

"You start to tell the other person to change, and the biggest thing is to tell them to change in ways they can't change, like do a personality overhaul," explained Doherty. "They become more defensive and withdraw, you have more conflict and in a year

or two, you can kill a marriage that was reasonably good."

In [A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval](#), scholars Paul Amato and Alan Booth found that divorces fall into a couple categories: Two-thirds are unhappy, but low-conflict marriages. The other third are high-conflict, "war zone" partnerships.

Doherty described the latter, "There's a lotta, lotta problems, and the parents are at each other's throats."

These are the marriages with infidelity, abuse, alcoholism or drug use and frequent arguments. Amato and Booth found when those marriages break up, the children are better off.

It's a different story for the other children, the ones from unsatisfying but not angry marriages. Amato and Booth found those children were seriously hurt by their parents' divorce.

"They were not sensing that there's something terrible wrong in the marriage," said Doherty. "They're not cowering when the parents are screaming at each other, they were not expecting a divorce and they take a dive."

Doherty said divorce tends to double the risk of academic, psychological and future relationship problems for those children.

"That risk -- that doubling the risk of serious problems -- continues into adulthood," he said.

Those findings were backed by Elizabeth Marquardt in her 2005 book, *Between Two Worlds—the Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*.

The state of Minnesota understands how hard divorce can be on children. That's why, in contested custody cases, parents have to take eight hours of parenting classes, like those offered by the Storefront Group.

Doherty has been doing research on those divorcing parents in Hennepin County. His findings are pretty surprising.

When asked, "Would you seriously consider a reconciliation service if one were offered?" -- 10 percent of the couples -- both husband and wife -- answered "Yes" or "Maybe."

That's just one reason Doherty feels strongly that couples should get help repairing their marriages rather than ending them forever.

"There are a lot of marriages that could have made it to year 25 and been pretty darn good if people weathered it and not bailed," he said.