I remember the scene in my house on a Friday afternoon, two years after my divorce. My son comes home from school, his temper already short because of the coming transition: My ex-husband is picking up the children to take them to his house for the weekend. My son remembers to pack his backpack and then has time to play a video game. His sister, four years younger, does not remember. She is deeply engaged with her Barbies. Suddenly, the doorbell rings: Dad has arrived, and he wants to leave immediately to avoid the rush-hour traffic. My daughter must stuff her bag as quickly as she can while her brother rushes to the door, not wanting to displease his father. He yells at his sister to hurry up! as she struggles to remember what she needs. I come in to say goodbye and give each of them a hug. Meanwhile, both children know that Dad is waiting. They want to get out the door as quickly as possible, but they do not want to slight my feelings. And they cannot afford to leave anything behind that they might need for school on Monday. My son hugs me and dashes to the car—my daughter clings to me a few moments longer, filled with conflicting feelings, before running after her brother. Both children are under pressure, caught by opposing loyalties. They long to please both parents, and they have to remember every single thing they will need for the three days they are spending with their father. This is emotionally charged multi-tasking of the most demanding sort, repeated twice a week with each transfer from one parent’s house to the other’s.

My son describes his life immediately prior to and after the divorce as walking on a narrow bridge across the sea. The tides—his parents’ moods, needs, and desires, and the tensions and conflicts between them—threatened to pull him down and drown him on either side. My daughter describes it as being put on trial in a foreign country where she knew neither the laws nor the language. Both children needed to become exquisitely aware of what each of their parents was feeling, how each of us would react to things said or done, in order to protect themselves from feeling emotionally swamped or from

**BINUCLEAR FAMILY**

Divorce is painful for children, but Ruth Bettelheim urges us to see what kids can gain when one family becomes two.
being barred from a desired activity, such as guitar lessons or a trip to the beach. As a result, they became highly intuitive observers of others’ emotions and superb diplomats, able to soothe the most fraught situations. They learned these skills both out of self-protection and out of loyalty to both parents. And they are not alone.

Study after study, even those conducted by the most vocal critics of divorce, has found that adult children of divorce are more empathic than their peers and have a greater devotion to honesty, kindness, integrity, and compassion in relationships. Although it may seem counterintuitive, the great challenges they face present these children with powerful opportunities for growth.

Living through a divorce is almost always difficult for children, but if it unfolds in a way that makes them feel empowered, the next time they face something hard or unfamiliar they will be able to do so with confidence rather than fear. As Judith Wallerstein writes in The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce:

Many children of divorce are stronger for their struggles. They think of themselves as survivors who have learned to rely on their own judgment and to take responsibility for themselves and others at a young age. They have had to invent their own morality and values. They understand the importance of economic independence and hard work. They do not take relationships lightly. Most maintain reverence for good family life.

Although this process is often painful for children, and although it is natural for us to regret their suffering, it is also unjust to the children of divorce to remain blind to what they have gained.

Discussions of divorce rarely consider these complexities. Instead, the last two decades have produced a tidal wave of divorce hysteria, and many divorced parents feel deeply stigmatized and guilty as a result. Divorce is blamed for the troubles of young people; the feeling is that if the youth of today is “in crisis,” this must, at least in part, have to do with the ravages of growing up in a nontraditional family, without the benefit of traditional parental roles.

In 1988, Joseph Guttmann conducted a study demonstrating that when teachers and counselors are told that the child they are watching on videotape is from a divorced family, they see the child as having significant problems. If they are told that the child comes from a traditional home, they find the same behavior by the same child unproblematic. Children on the receiving end of this bias end up being treated by parents, teachers, and others as “problem children,” when in fact they are perfectly normal. If we believe that children are damaged, we force them to respond—often in negative ways—to this depiction of themselves.

On the other hand, if we believe that they are successfully solving important problems and gaining valuable new skills and abilities, we make it easier for children to have confidence in themselves and their ability to overcome obstacles. These research findings and observations suggest that we need a new perspective on divorce. Rather than writing these children off as wounded victims, we must understand how parents can help their children thrive rather than flounder after a divorce.

The lessons of divorce

In general, parents don’t divorce unless there are deep, unbridgeable differences between them. In my case, full of idealism, I married a man from a radically different religious and cultural background. I came from a family of intellectual Jewish refugees; he came from a Mennonite family who eschewed cars and plowed its small farm with a horse. Still, we felt at first that we had so much in common that these things were insignificant. Over time, however, problems arose between us because of the fundamentally different things that we each needed and wanted out of life and a relationship.

Profound, irrevocable differences like these are behind many divorces. Were it possible to resolve these differences, most parents would choose to stay together and avoid the anguish and difficulties of dividing the family. After the divorce, these differences can finally flourish. That is what the parents need. But it creates a new set of problems for the children.

After a divorce, children no longer live in a world where there is one agreed-upon set of rules, values, or beliefs. Suddenly there are two sets of rules about bedtime, bath time, homework, TV, movies, video games, hugs, table manners, good behavior, and bad behavior. In one house you must attend church; in the other religion is disregarded. In one you must always say please, thank you, hello, goodbye, and ask permission to go out; in the other these things are not necessary. In one house it is a sign of being a “goody-two-shoes” to worry about arriving to school on time and getting each assignment in promptly, while in the other these are required. The two homes are in fact two different cultures, and because of this, children in “binuclear” post-divorce families become adept at living in two worlds. They are forced to recognize that there is more than one right way to do things and that they had better learn very quickly what the rules are in each milieu so that they don’t upset either parent or get into trouble.

I remember my son as a 13-year-old, my daughter as a fourth grader. They were faced with conflicts of loyalty that permeated their lives on a daily basis. My daughter expressed her anxiety by withdrawing into
They take moving across the country, or the globe, in stride, and their friends often turn to them when in need of emotional insight and support. Like so many other children of divorce, they are succeeding where our culture expects them to fail.

Additionally, in my experience and in that of researchers across the ideological spectrum, living in two divergent cultures causes children to become self-reflective and autonomous thinkers. Each parent’s point of view must be considered and evaluated, though they are often at odds with each other. As a result, children quickly learn that there are at least two valid points of view on almost every issue, and it is up to him or her to decide which ones make the most sense. Such children are forced to develop ethics and opinions of their own, based on their own perceptions and experiences. In the same way, in each household these children are likely to be viewed and evaluated in dissimilar ways, since each parent values traits differently. As a result, they cannot fully accept the self-image imposed on them by either parent, but instead must develop a sense of identity that is uniquely their own.

Growing up differently
Children learn what it is to be a man or a woman in large part by watching their parents, and the children of divorce observe things that most of their peers do not: They see their fathers acting as primary caretakers, and their mothers as heads of households.

Because of this, my son is in many ways a very different man from his father, or either of his grandfathers. My ex-husband and I both had very old-fashioned fathers. They were not involved in day-to-day child rearing. Occasionally they disciplined us, or tried to teach us something about the world or some life skills. But both men subscribed to essentially 19th-century roles as fathers.

Before the divorce, my ex-husband and I also delegated household tasks along traditional lines. I was in charge of caring for the children, cooking meals, etc., while he did house repairs and yard work. To our children, my ex-husband was a relatively distant figure who had little to do with their daily lives—not because of lack of love or caring, but because that was how he was taught to be a father.

All this changed with the divorce. For the first time, my ex-husband was confronted with being a parent who was responsible for all aspects of the children’s lives. This was not easy for him. He had absolutely no role models, background, or training for this. He wanted badly to be fully engaged in the children’s lives: take them to school, help with homework, provide meals, and so on. But he had to invent the whole thing from scratch. As a devoted father who was determined to maintain his relationship with the children and to provide for their needs, he had to struggle. At first the task was overwhelming, but gradually he found a way to be a different kind of father than he had been during our marriage. Although certain kinds of empathy and nurturing behavior are still difficult for him, he learned to meet many of the children’s needs that had previously been out of his sphere. From this example, my son learned how to be a parent in ways that his own father was never taught as a child.

At the same time, my daughter watched me support my family while remaining first and foremost a mother. She has seen me juggle a full-time career with childcare and domestic tasks. In addition to cooking dinner and sewing buttons, I taught her how to change a flat tire, balance a checkbook, and fix a leaky faucet. She has seen me take on the tremendous risk of starting over as a divorced mother with two young children—and succeed because of it. As an adult, my daughter is independent, adventurous, and assertive when the situation calls for it. She does not believe she needs a man to take care of her, or that she will need to choose between a career and a family.

Challenges for parents
Researchers of all stripes have found that most, if not all, of the problems blamed on divorce (other than those caused by poverty) are actually attributable to a lack of warm, consistent, attentive, authoritative, and respectful parenting. In order to maintain children’s self-confidence and teach them the self-control that they need to thrive, parents must set and enforce boundaries; this is particularly true for boys, who often have greater difficulty learning self-regulation than girls. It is self-control and self-confidence that enable children to make use of the skills they learn in a binuclear family.

Many post-divorce families have been paralyzed by parents’ negative assumptions about divorce and their feelings of guilt. It is not that they are wrong to believe that divorce has been a painful experience: Divorce is difficult for most, if not all, children. The problem is that these parents sometimes forget what their children need. For in many ways, children in divorced families need the same things as children in every other kind of family: love, structure,
consistent and reasonable boundaries, and for their parents to believe that they are not damaged individuals. As Mavis Hetherington, the author of the largest longitudinal study ever conducted on children in divorced families, points out in her book *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*:

Coping with the challenges of divorce and life in a single-parent family seems actually to enhance the ability of some children to deal with future stresses. But children can’t cope alone; there needs to be a supportive adult in their lives to help buffer them from adversity.

As in any family, rules should be few but important; parents must establish firm, logical consequences for their children’s behavior. For example, if children (without a learning disability) are not maintaining at least a “C” average in school, clearly they need to spend more time on homework. Therefore, parents should restrict the time they devote to other pleasures until their grades improve. On the other hand, parents should notice and praise any and all progress toward the goals they set, even the smallest ones—for example, improving from a “D+” to a “C-“.

Divorced parents often have concerns about these kinds of rules. They cannot bear to deny their children any pleasure after all the pain the divorce has caused them. Parents fear that enforcing rules like these will simply cause the child to endure further losses, or that the other parent, who may not enforce such rules, will be more beloved. However, even if only one parent provides this kind of structure, it will be enough to make a positive difference in a child’s life. As Hetherington notes, “An involved, supportive, firm custodial mother is often able to counter adverse effects of both the lack of a father and poverty.”

What matters is that children know that someone cares about and respects them enough to pay attention to their behavior and to set boundaries that protect their well-being and development.

What matters is that children know that someone cares about and respects them enough to pay attention to their behavior and to set boundaries that protect their well-being and development.

Given the right sort of parenting, children who grow up in binuclear families gain a unique opportunity. Our society is changing at an ever-accelerating pace, and we now live in a global service economy. Many have documented the attributes needed to excel in such a society; borrowing from the work of psychologist and cultural commentator Daniel Goleman, these traits include empathy, emotional awareness, self-confidence, self-control, social deftness, persuasiveness, resilience, cooperation, and adaptability.

This list of traits closely matches those learned by children of both genders growing up in binuclear families, especially those fortunate enough to have caring, authoritative parents. Given the premium on these abilities, children from binuclear families may actually be at an advantage later in life. They will have been forced to develop a skill set that will enable them to be uniquely competent partners, parents, and professionals. Their futures can be bright—not in spite of but because of what they have endured.

**Ruth Bettelheim, Ph.D.**, has been a practicing psychotherapist, marriage and family counselor, and lecturer for over 40 years, and has taught courses on child development at the Claremont Graduate School and the California School for Professional Psychology. Her essay was written with the input of her two children, Aurelia and Matthew Flaming. It was adapted from her book *What Makes a Man*, edited by Rebecca Walker. Used by permission of Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

**Helping Kids Be Kids**

*BY JOANNE PEDRO-CARROLL*

I met Jennifer when she was seven years old and her parents were in the midst of a bitter divorce. Her second grade teacher had noticed that Jennifer had become withdrawn and listless in class, worried about making mistakes and frequently complaining of a stomachache. This teacher referred Jennifer to the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP), a program I founded in 1982.

Backed by years of carefully controlled research, the CODIP consists of two essential components. First, we bring children together with kindred peers to share their feelings and experiences. Through these groups, we try to clarify their misconceptions, reduce their sense of isolation, and promote positive perceptions of themselves and their families. Second, we help children cultivate skills that, according to research, promote healthy responses to divorce. These skills include effective communication, self-control, and learning how to differentiate between problems they can and cannot solve.

Several studies have shown that children improve significantly after participating in the program, even two years down the line.

Consider how the program worked for Jennifer. In her first few group meetings, she listened intently while group leaders and other children spoke about their feelings. We often use puppets to act out difficult situations; during a scene in which the puppet “Terry Turtle” worried that a divorce was her fault, Jennifer spoke for the first time. “That’s how I feel… just like Terry,” she said. “I think I’m the cause of all the trouble and fights because I hear my name when they fight.” Gently, I talked with the children about how it can sometimes seem like kids cause the problems between parents—sometimes it can even seem like kids can fix these problems—but that divorce is something only adults can resolve. Jennifer gradually became more vocal and participated in group activities with enthusiasm. After the program ended, her teacher reported that she was less anxious and more engaged in class, and had even stopped complaining of frequent stomachaches.

“It’s a grown-up problem,” Jennifer once said with a smile. “Kids just need to be kids!”

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