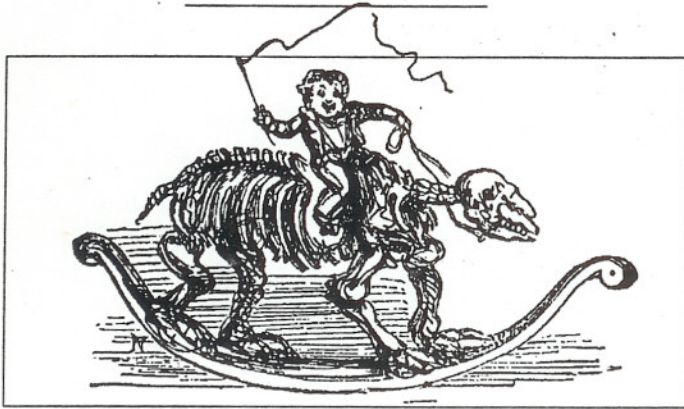


BOOKS

THE REAL EFFECT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN



DIVIDED FAMILIES: WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN WHEN PARENTS PART

BY FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR. AND ANDREW J. CHERLIN
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$18.95

The first in a new series of publications on The Family and Public Policy from Harvard University Press, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* targets "policymakers, practitioners, and the public at large" in an attempt to shed new light on issues surrounding the children of divorce. Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, and Andrew J. Cherlin, Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University, document their findings with excerpts from the latest studies by the country's top psychologists, legal scholars, historians, sociologists, and demographers. To illustrate the effects of divorce on children, the authors counterpoint their text with the problems faced by a typical middle-class couple as they struggle with separation and divorce issues, the ensuing emotional and financial traumas, and the effect of divorce upon their two children.

The author's premise is simple: "Dependent children must be guaranteed domestic stability and economic security even though their parents no longer pool resources." When married, most couples contribute unequal amounts to their family's income; the father's income is usually greater. With divorce, the conversion of a two-parent economy into two separate incomes becomes more disparate. The "effective parent," most often the mother, invariably suffers severe economic losses, as do her children. A significantly reduced income (often compared to the losses suffered by families during the Depression) leads to a dramatic reduction in the single mother's standard of living. This is especially true for middle class mothers and their children.

Insuring stability to the children of divorce has one major stumbling block: most men view marriage and children as a "package deal." Once their marriages are broken, ties and obligations to their children are also often severed. Inad-

equated or no child support payments are an easy next step for many non-custodial fathers, followed by little, if any, interaction with their children. This increases if the ex-husband remarries and/or starts a new family.

The authors argue that the children of divorce who "do well" live in conflict-free environments (particularly those conflicts surrounding child custody issues) and have mothers who provide love, nurturing, a predictable routine, and discipline. This is not so very different from the mother's role in traditional two-parent families. Herein lies the problem. When these conditions are met, the children of divorce stand a good chance of successfully adapting to their situation. But rarely can a single mother provide emotional and financial stability to her children after divorce. The lack of adequate child support, economic losses, the emotional trauma of divorce, solo parenting, and joint custody problems leave many single mothers unable to parent effectively. An average of five years can elapse before divorced women are emotionally and financially able to function well. During this time, the bulk of responsibility for the children's well-being sits squarely on her shoulders.

The fading father is unfortunately the norm. Most ex-husbands divorce the children along with their ex-wives because most men relate to their children only through their wives in the first place. In order to maintain an equal balance between ex-partners about their children's continued well-being, the authors recommend a stricter enforcement of child-support laws so that the custodial parent can function in the best possible way after divorce. Most single mothers are intimidated by the legal system, in part because the courts are biased in favor of the father rather than in the interest of the children. Father's rights are usually put first in legal matters. Because of this, the rights of the children often fall to the wayside. This is especially true for those children whose fathers pay no support. The authors recommend that the government provide more assistance to these children.

Interestingly, authors Furstenberg and Cherlin argue that only after effective parenting by the mother will an ongoing relationship with fathers prove

beneficial to the children of divorce. Maintaining ties with the father does not appear to be related to the successful adjustment of these children. The authors emphasize that the father-child relationship should be encouraged, but argue that a radical change in the way most fathers relate to their children pre-divorce must take place in order to insure that more fathers remain involved with their children after divorce. One of the major casualties here is the shattered relationship between a father and his children.

The statistics are grim, and when much of the problem boils down to a matter of cold hard cash, policymakers need to address ways to serve the needs

of these children in the best possible way. "Our chances of improving children's adjustment to divorce are probably better if we concentrate on supporting custodial parents and reducing conflict" advise Furstenberg and Cherlin. While most non-custodial fathers will object strenuously to these recommendations, the important issue is the well-being of the children. To improve their children's adjustment to divorce, more assistance must be provided to custodial parents, and custody and other divorce-related conflicts must also be reduced. Policymakers can help by advocating changes in family law that have these aims in mind.

—K.S. Nelson

PATIENCE, HUMILITY, AND SELF-AWARENESS

JACOB THE BAKER: GENTLE WISDOM FOR A COMPLICATED WORLD BY NOAH BENSHEA BALLANTINE BOOKS, \$7.95

In *Jacob the Baker*, Noah benShea weaves a series of conversations and observations into a story about a wise baker, Jacob, whose words offer "gentle wisdom for a complicated world." At the very beginning of the story Jacob remembers a time when an old man would rap at the shutters and call people to morning prayers: "The old man was gone. (Jacob) wonders what people would do if he started banging on their shutters" (p.4). But this is not his style. Jacob keeps his wise thoughts and observations to himself, writing them down on small slips of paper as the bread rises in the ovens beside him. Only when one of these slips is accidentally baked into a loaf and discovered by an appreciative customer does his wisdom become known. The whole town seeks him out, asking him questions and challenging him to divulge, in ten words or less, the meaning of life.

Patience, humility, and self-awareness are themes that appear consistently in Jacob's message to the townsfolk. I immediately recognized that Jacob the Baker is worth reading if only for that one story or observation that really strikes you and applies to your own life. The chances are good that at least one of Jacob's slips of paper will provide insight into a problem that is now plaguing you.

However, certain statements may seem corny or simplistic, as if benShea tried to summarize his entire philosophy in one blanket statement. For example, on page six Jacob stares intently at the dough mixer: "His eyes followed the spiral metal arm on its endless roll. Its pattern confirmed a truth he saw everywhere." What truth is that? That life is an endless mixing of ever-changing ingredients?

Try not to let these few awkward moments color your perception of the



entire book, because it is written with a clarity and generosity of spirit that is unique and inspiring. One of my favorite exchanges centers around Jacob's observation that "the fist starves the hand." An angry man confronts Jacob, demanding to know what this means. Jacob replies that "When our hand is made into a fist, we cannot receive the gifts of life from ourselves, our friends, or our God. When our hand is closed in a fist, we cannot hold anything but our bitterness. When we do this, we starve our stomachs and our souls" (p. 27). As we know, a fist is all too easy to make. Fortunately, Jacob's words have a way of coming to you just as your fingers start to curl into that all too familiar gesture.

This book is an excellent complement to a work like Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*; it is more accessible to a wider audience. Requiring less than two hours to read, it is easy to step in and out of; it could very well be the perfect gift for a recent graduate. Jacob is a very likeable, human character, and we are well-advised to pause and embrace the Jacob in our own lives, the "long-ignored human treasure suddenly unearthed" (p. 18).

—Diane Mical