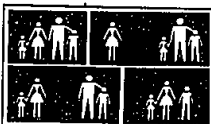


## Social changes contribute to world's highest rate

This is the 12th in a series of 15 articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, sociologist Robert S. Weiss discusses the causes and implications of our high divorce rate.

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By Robert S. Weiss  
special writer



### Families in Transition

In the United States today there is a divorce for every two marriages. Not quite two and one-half million couples married in 1981. Almost one and one-quarter million couples were divorced. Ours is now the highest divorce rate in the world. Each year, 18 million of our young people experience what once was termed "broken homes."

These figures help explain the frequently voiced fear that the modern American family is falling apart. There is no question that the high frequency of divorce has changed the character of American family life.

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Almost half of American children born today will spend part of their growing-up years in a single-parent family, according to Census Bureau estimates. Remarriage will become increasingly common; already one-tenth of American children live with a stepparent.

Still, divorce is nothing new for Americans. The divorce rate in the United States has always been higher than that in Europe, and has been increasing at least since 1867, when American divorce statistics were first collected.

EXCEPT FOR a brief period of decline during the Depression of the 1930s, and again during the later 1940s and the 1950s, the rate of divorce has risen an average of 2.3 percent per year.

In the 1960s, however, the divorce rate began increasing rapidly, doubling between 1965 and 1976. Although by 1978 it had leveled off again, it has been increasing slowly since.

The gradual long-term increase in the divorce rate could have resulted from a number of factors:

- Increased urbanization, bringing with it greater freedom from social pressures;
- Increased acceptance of women's rights to independent lives, including their rights to leave intolerable marriages;
- Increased affluence and opportunity, together with smaller families, which may have made it easier for men and women to begin new lives.

To some extent the dramatic increase in the divorce rate in the 1960s and 1970s was self-fueling. As there were more divorces, social pressure against divorce eased.

Judges no longer insisted that a couple remain married only because neither husband nor wife could demonstrate legal grounds for divorce. Divorce statutes themselves were liberalized by state legislatures.

UNHAPPILY married individuals no longer had to resign themselves either to making the best of their unwanted marriages or to living permanently in the uncomfortable situation of the informally separated.

At the same time, profound changes were taking place in our social lives. We no longer believed so strongly that a woman's aspirations should be limited to her roles as wife and mother. Increasingly, we accepted women working outside the home because they wanted to, not just because they needed to.

Increasingly, too, we respected men's and women's desires for happiness and personal growth, even if these desires conflicted with marital obligations.

PARADOXICALLY, our high divorce rate can be seen as testimony to the importance in our lives of our marriage. Surveys show that it is harder for us to be happy if we are dissatisfied with our marriages and our family lives than if we are dissatisfied with our jobs, our friends or incomes.

It may be because we Americans so often move far from the families in which we grew up and from the friends we had then made that we look to our marriages for satisfaction of so many of our emotional needs. But because we expect so much of our marriages, an unhappy marriage becomes difficult to tolerate.

Although marital separation provides an escape from the quarrels and silences of a bad marriage, it brings major new problems. The first year after separation tends to be a time of upset, uncertainty, loneliness and depression, sometimes relieved by the excitement of experiments with new ways of living.

Married friends often drift away as the absence of common concerns becomes evident. Many among the separated and divorced remain for a time emotionally linked to their former partners even though they no longer are socially linked.

Until the mid-19th century, judges generally awarded custody of the children of divorcing parents to the fathers, who were thought to be better able to provide for them. However, as fathers' work separated them from their homes and mothers were seen as the sources of the nurturance and understanding children required, judges increasingly adopted "the doctrine of tender years." A child too young to fend for itself belongs with its mother.

By the beginning of the 20th century mothers were almost always given custody of preadolescent children, and of adolescent girls as well unless the mothers were shown to be immoral, alcoholic or mentally ill.

**For the woman who becomes a single parent, money is a constant worry. Nearly one-third of separated and divorced mothers initially receive some public financial assistance.**

IN THE PAST decade judges have begun to consider fathers as potential custodians of small children even when the mothers are also "fit" parents. Nevertheless, more than 90 percent of children whose parents are divorced continue to live with their mothers.

Both custodial and noncustodial parents often tend to be dissatisfied. The parents who have custody often feel overwhelmed by the double responsibility of raising children and obtaining an adequate income.

The parents without custody often feel bitter at having lost home and children, along with their marriage, while still being required to provide regular payment to the former spouse who retains them.

Most important for children who were close to both parents is that the children continue to be able to see or talk with either parent whenever they want to.

CHILDREN FIND unsatisfactory the traditional arrangement in which one parent has the custody and the other is allowed only "reasonable visitation," because the visiting parent seems unavailable most of the time.

Some divorcing parents are now exploring "shared custody," in which both parents retain the rights and responsibilities they would have had if they had not separated. Among them are parents who also have their children alternate residences on a split-week basis or another basis.

Although some children seem to be confused by these arrangements, and adolescents, in particular, may complain that they interfere with their social lives, children often prefer them to alternatives in which the children would have less access to the non-custodial parent.

For the woman who becomes a single parent, money is a constant worry. Nearly one-third of separated and divorced mothers initially receive some public financial assistance.

However, within a very few years, most of these no longer receive public aid. Some have remarried; others live on their own earnings, perhaps augmented by support payments from their former husbands.

FOR SINGLE parents, remarriage often creates both feelings of well-being and an adequate household income. About four out of five divorced Americans eventually remarry; further testimony to the importance to us of marriage.

Yet the stepparent family has ten-

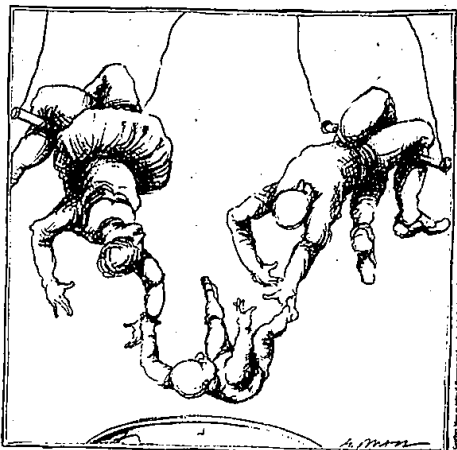
sions of its own. Conflicts may develop over parents' loyalties as well as over responsibilities and authority in relation to children not their own.

The children may continue to feel loyal to a parent outside the home. Although divorced parents may well have happy second marriages, they are certain to encounter issues they did not have to deal with in their first marriages.

In our marriages, more than in most areas of our lives, we Americans are experiencing fundamental changes. Increased acceptability of divorce as a solution to marital difficulty is among the foremost of these.

We have all become like immigrants to a new society, even the majority of us for whom this is the country of our birth. In that we must cope with family forms and family understandings different in important ways from those with which we grew up.

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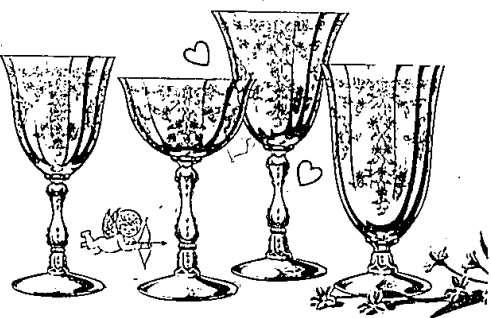


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NEXT WEEK: Joseph H. Plock, Program Director of Wellesley College's Center for Research on Women, examines some of the new forms of family that are becoming increasingly common.

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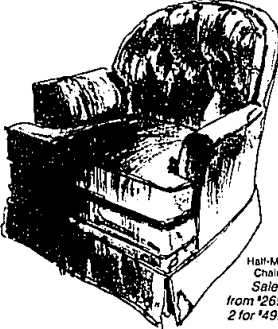
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