Knobel Mediation Services, LLC
Barry Knobel
Family Court Mediator and Arbitrator
Anderson, South Carolina

The Divorce Generation

Having survived their own family splits, Generation X parents are determined to keep their marriages together. It doesn't always work.

By SUSAN GREGORY THOMAS

Stephen Webster

Gen-X's quest for perfect nests drove us to take out more home equity loans and to spend more on remodeling, per capita, than any generation before it, according to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies.

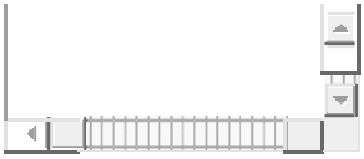
Every generation has its life-defining moments. If you want to find out what it was for a member of the Greatest Generation, you ask: "Where were you on D-Day?" For baby boomers, the questions are: "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" or "What were you doing when Nixon resigned?"

Every generation has its defining moment. For Generation X, it could be: "When did your parents get divorced?" Susan Gregory Thomas, author of the memoir "In Spite of Everything," explains what she sees as its long-term effects on marriage and parenting.

For much of my generation—Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980—there is only one question: "When did your parents get divorced?" Our lives have been framed by the answer. Ask us. We remember everything.

When my dad left in the spring of 1981 and moved five states away with his executive assistant and her four kids, the world as I had known it came to an end. In my 12-year-old eyes, my mother, formerly a regal, erudite figure, was transformed into a phantom in a sweaty nightgown and matted hair, howling on the floor of our gray-carpeted playroom. My brother, a sweet, goofy boy, grew into a sad, glowering giant, barricaded in his room with dark graphic novels and computer games.

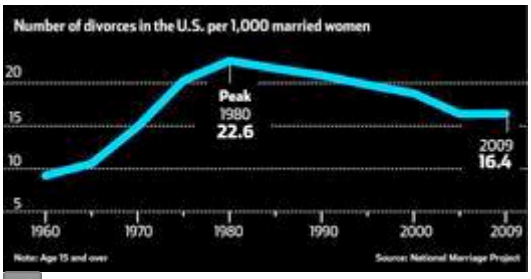
I spent the rest of middle and high school getting into trouble in suburban Philadelphia: chain-smoking, doing drugs, getting kicked out of schools, spending a good part of my senior year in a psychiatric ward. Whenever I saw my father, which was rarely, he grew more and more to embody Darth Vader: a brutal machine encasing raw human guts.

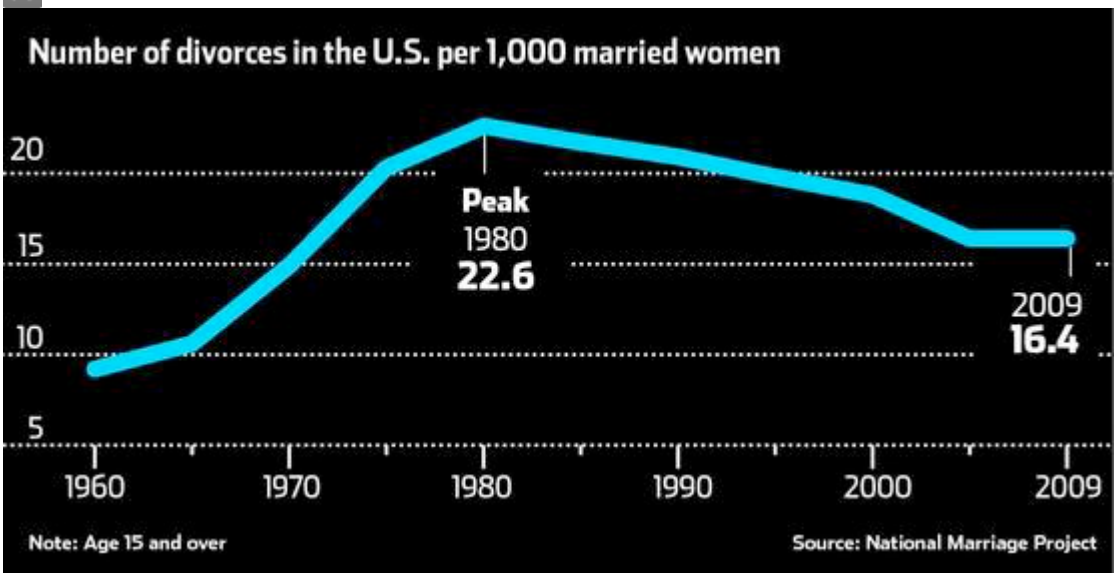


Growing up, my brother and I were often left to our own devices, members of the giant flock of migrant latchkey kids in the 1970s and '80s. Our suburb was littered with sad-eyed, bruised nomads, who wandered back and forth between used-record shops to the sheds behind the train station where they got high and then trudged off, back and forth from their mothers' houses during the week to their fathers' apartments every other weekend.

The divorced parents of a boy I knew in high school installed him in his own apartment because neither of them wanted him at home. Naturally, we all descended on his place after school—sometimes during school—to drink and do drugs. He was always wasted, no matter what time we arrived. A few years ago, a friend told me that she had learned that he had drunk himself to death by age 30.

View Full Image





"Whatever happens, we're never going to get divorced." Over the course of 16 years, I said that often to my husband, especially after our children were born. Apparently, much of my generation feels at least roughly the same way: Divorce rates, which peaked around 1980, are now at their lowest level since 1970. In fact, the often-cited statistic that half of all marriages end in divorce was true only in the 1970s—in other words, our parents' marriages.

Not ours. According to U.S. Census data released this May, 77% of couples who married since 1990 have reached their 10-year anniversaries. We're also marrying later in life, if at all. The average marrying age in 1950 was 23 for men and 20 for women; in 2009, it was 28 for men and 26 for women.

Before we get married, we like to know what our daily relationship with a partner will be like. Are we good roommates? A 2007 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that, among those entering first marriages in the early 2000s, nearly 60% had previously cohabited with their future spouses. According to the U.S. government's 2002 National Survey of Fertility Growth, 34% of couples who move in together have announced publicly that marriage is in the future; 36% felt "almost certain" that they'd get hitched, while 46% said there was "a pretty good chance" or "a 50-50 chance."

I believed that I had married my best friend as fervently as I believed that I'd never get divorced. No marital scenario, I told myself, could become so bleak or hopeless as to compel me to embed my children in the torture of a split family. And I wasn't the only one with strong personal reasons to make this commitment. According to a 2004 marketing study about generational differences, my age cohort "went through its all-important, formative years as one of the least parented, least nurtured generations in U.S. history." Census data show that almost half of us come from split families; 40% were latch-key kids.

People my parents' age say things like: "Of course you'd feel devastated by divorce, honey—it was a horrible, disorienting time for you as a child! Of course you wouldn't want it for yourself and your family, but sometimes it's better for everyone that parents part ways; everyone is happier."

Such sentiments bring to mind a set of statistics in "Generations" by William Strauss and Neil Howe that has stuck with me: In 1962, half of all adult women believed that parents in bad marriages should stay together for the children's sake; by 1980, only one in five felt that way. "Four-fifths of [those] divorced adults profess to being happier afterward," the authors write, "but a majority of their children feel otherwise."

20th Century Fox

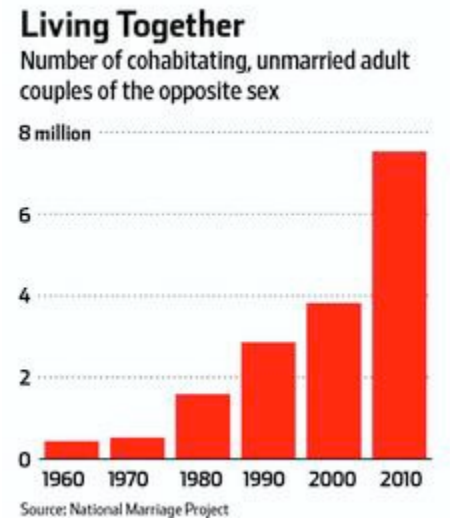
Many Generation X parents are all too familiar with the brutal court fights of their parents, and today, 'friendly divorces' are increasingly common. Here, Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas in 1989's 'The War of the Roses.'

But a majority of their children feel otherwise. There is something intolerable about that clause. I can't help feeling that every divorce, in its way, is a re-enactment of "Medea": the wailing, murderously bereft mother; the cold father protecting his pristine, new family; the children: dead.

When I had my first child at 32, I went into therapy for a while to sort through, among other things, just why the world—as open and wonderful as it had become with my child's presence—had also become more treacherous than I ever could have imagined. It wasn't until my daughter was a few months old that it dawned on me that when the pediatricians and child-care books referred to "separation anxiety," they were referring to the baby's psyche, not to mine.

The thought of placing her in someone else's care sent waves of pure, white fear whipping up my spine. It occurred to me that perhaps my own origins had something to do with what a freak show I was. After hearing about my background for some time, my distinguished therapist made an announcement: "You," she said, "are a war orphan."

Orphans as parents—that's not a bad way to understand Generation X parents. Having grown up without stable homes, we pour everything that we have into giving our children just that, no matter how many sacrifices it involves. Indeed, Gen-X's quest for perfect nests drove us to take out more home equity loans and to spend more on remodeling, per capita, than any generation before it, according to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies.



Marketing surveys reveal that Generation X mothers don't seek parenting advice from their own moms. Why would we take counsel from the very people who, in our view, flubbed it all up? Instead, says the research, we depend on the people who actually raised us, albeit wolf-pack style: our friends.

To allow our own marriages to end in divorce is to live out our worst childhood fears. More horrifying, it is to inflict the unthinkable on what we most love and want to protect: our children. It is like slashing open our own wounds and turning the knife on our babies. To consider it is unbearable.

My husband and I were as obvious as points on a graph in a Generation X marriage study. We were together for nearly eight years before we got married, and even though statistics show that divorce rates are 48% higher for those who have lived together previously, we paid no heed.

We also paid no heed to his Catholic parents, who comprised one of the rare reassuringly unified couples I'd ever met, when they warned us that we should wait until we were married to live together. As they put it, being pals and roommates is different from being husband and wife. How bizarrely old-fashioned and sexist! We didn't need anything so naïve or retro as "marriage." Please. We were best friends.

Sociologists, anthropologists and other cultural observers tell us that members of Generation X are more emotionally invested in our spouses than previous generations were. We are best friends; our marriages are genuine partnerships. Many studies have found that Generation X family men help around the house a good deal more than their forefathers. We depend on each other and work together.

Adultery is far more devastating for us than it was for our parents or grandparents. A 2003 study by the late psychologist Shirley Glass found that the mores of sexual infidelity are undergoing a profound change. The traditional standard for men—love is love and sex is sex—is dying out. Increasingly, men and women develop serious emotional attachments with their would-be lovers long before they commit adultery. As a result, she found, infidelity today is much more likely to lead to divorce.

View Full Image

Everett Collection

In 'Kramer vs. Kkramer' (1979) young Billy is caught in a custody battle.

Call us helicopter parents, call us neurotically attached, but those of us who survived the wreckage of split families were determined never to inflict such wounds on our children. We knew better. We were doing everything differently, and the fundamental premise was simple: "Kids come first" meant that we would not divorce.

But marriages do dissolve, even among those determined never to let it happen. After nine years, my husband and I had become wretched, passive-aggressive roommates. I had given up trying to do anything in the kitchen and had not washed a dish in a year. My husband had not been able to "find time" to read the book I had written. We rarely spoke, except about logistics. We hadn't slept in the same room for at least two years, a side effect of the nighttime musical bed routine that parents of so many young children play in semiconsciousness for years on end.

Yet I never considered divorce. It never even entered my mind. I was grateful that my babies had a perfect father, for our family meals, for the stability of our home, for neighborhood play dates.

But then, one evening, I found myself where I vowed I'd never be: miserable, in tears, telling my husband that we were like siblings who couldn't stand each other rather than a couple, and listening as my husband said he felt as though we had never really been a couple and regretted that we hadn't split up a decade earlier. "I'm done," he said. It was as if a cosmic force had been unleashed; the awful finality of it roared in like an enormous black cloud blotting out the sky, over every inch of the world. It was done.

That was four years ago. Even now, I still wonder every day if there was something that I—we—could have done differently. Like many of my cohort, the circumstances of my upbringing led

me to believe that I had made exactly the right choices by doing everything differently from my parents.

I had married the kindest, most stable person I'd ever known to ensure that our children would never know anything of the void of my own childhood. I nursed, loved, read to and lolled about with my babies—restructured and re-imagined my career—so that they would be secure, happy, attended to. My husband and I made the happiest, most comfy nest possible. We worked as a team; we loved our kids; we did everything right, better than right. And yet divorce came. In spite of everything.

I don't know what makes a good marriage. I am inclined to think that Mark Twain was right when he wrote in an 1894 journal: "No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century." But I did know something about divorce, and I wanted—and my former husband wanted—to do it as "well" as possible.

Many of us do. The phrase "friendly divorce" may strike some as an oxymoron, but it is increasingly a trend and a real possibility. Relatively inexpensive and nonadversarial divorce mediation—rather than pricey, contentious litigation—is now more common than ever. Many of us are all too familiar with the brutal court fights of our parents, and we have no intention of putting our kids through it, too. According to a recent University of Virginia study, couples who decide to mediate their divorce are more likely than those who go to court to talk regularly about the children's needs and problems, to participate in school and special events, daily activities, holidays and vacations.

We may not make it in marriage, but we still want to make it as parents. In the '70s, only nine states permitted joint custody. Today, every state has adopted it. It was once typical for dads to recede from family life, or to drop out altogether, in the wake of a divorce. But dads are critical in helping kids to develop self-esteem and constructive habits of behavior. A 2009 study published in the journal Child Development found, for example, that teenagers with involved fathers are less likely to engage in risky sexual activities.

Joint custody also reduces family strife. According to a 2001 study, couples with such arrangements report less conflict with their former spouses than sole-custody parents—an important finding, since judges have worried, historically, that joint custody exposes children to ongoing parental fighting. Some divorced couples have even decided to continue living together in different parts of the home—or to "swap out" each week—in order to maintain some measure of stability for their kids.

I have yet to meet the divorced mother or father who feels like a good parent, who professes to being happier with how their children are now being raised. Many of us have ended up inflicting pain on our children, which we did everything to avoid.

But we have not had our parents' divorces either. We can only hope that in this, we have done it differently in the right way.

—Adapted from "In Spite of Everything: A Memoir" by Susan Gregory Thomas, to be published by Random House next week. Copyright © by Susan Gregory Thomas.