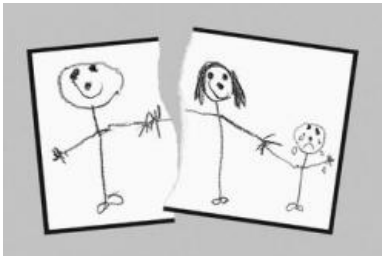


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Newsweek Discovers the Divorce Generation

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“In our parents’ generation, marriage was still the most powerful social force. In ours, it was divorce,” writes David J. Jefferson. “My 44-year-old classmates and I have watched divorce morph from something shocking, even shameful, into a routine fact of American life.”

Jefferson writes the cover story in this week’s edition of *Newsweek* — “[The Divorce Generation Grows Up](#).” The article is a candid and bracing look at the lingering effects of the divorce revolution as experienced in Jefferson’s own 1982 graduating class at Grant High School in California’s sprawling San Fernando Valley.

Looking back, Jefferson observes that the Valley childhood he experienced was largely defined by marital divorce:

Ignorant of the picket fences around our tract homes, divorce was a constant intruder in the San Fernando Valley of my youth. Although I grew up a few blocks from the “Brady Bunch” house, the similarity between that TV family’s tract-rancher and the ones where my friends and I lived pretty much ended at the front door. In the real Valley of the 1970s, families weren’t coming together. They were coming apart. We were the “Divorce Generation,” latchkey kids raised with after-school specials about broken families and “Kramer vs. Kramer,” the 1979 best-picture winner that left kids worrying that their parents would be the next to divorce. Our parents couldn’t seem to make marriage stick, and neither could our pop icons: Sonny and Cher; Farrah Fawcett and Lee Majors, the saccharine Swedes from Abba, all splitsville.

And “Splitsville” is the leading word on *Newsweek*’s cover. And, adding fuel to the argument that “no fault” divorce laws have subverted the integrity of the family unit, Jefferson adds that the year he entered kindergarten — 1969 — was the year Gov. Ronald Reagan (divorced once himself) signed California’s no fault law. As he explains:



Not since Henry VIII’s breakup with the pope has divorce received such a boost: by the time my friends and I entered our senior year at Ulysses S. Grant High School, divorce rates had soared to their highest level ever, with 5.3 per 1,000 people getting divorced each year, more than double the rate in the 1950s. Just as we were old enough to wed, experts were predicting that nearly one in two marriages would end in divorce.

Jefferson lists a tragic set of divorce statistics on his way to asking the questions that led to his article — “When we were growing up, divorce loomed as the ultimate threat to innocence, but what were my peers’ feelings about it now that they were adults? What I wanted to know was how divorce had affected our class president and Miss Congeniality, the stoners and the valedictorian. Did it leave them with emotional scars that never healed, or did they go on to lead “normal” lives? Did they wind up in divorce court, or did they achieve the domestic bliss their parents had sought in suburbia?”

In order to find out, he went back to his yearbook and tracked down several of his classmates. They told their stories and answered Jefferson’s questions. They told tales of hiding their parents’ divorce from classmates — even the classmates whose own parents were divorced, of the trauma of custody arrangements and parental estrangement, of problems with their parents’ new spouses.

They grew up too fast, by their own account. Elyse Oliver explained, “We were latchkey kids,” going on to relate that

she and her sister basically took care of themselves and cooked dinner. By her own recollection, she acted out. As the article relates:

At the age of 9, she was smoking. At 13, she was having sex. "My boyfriend at the time went up to my mom and said, 'Hey, we want to have sex, can you put her on the pill?'" Her mother agreed.

Jefferson's best friend at Grant High School, Chris Kohnhorst, had a particularly tough time dealing with his parents' divorce in junior high because his mom was a teacher in the school. Later, he had to serve as a 15-year-old divorce counselor for his father. In a sad reversal of roles, Kohnhorst had to hold his father together through yet another divorce — a role no 15-year-old boy should be called upon to fill. The article explains:

"When my father's second marriage collapsed, I was a 15-year-old high-school freshman who was forced to become a crisis counselor; sitting in the front seat of his car for endless hours listening to him and trying to keep him from completely breaking down," my buddy Chris Kohnhorst recalls. He may have been helping his dad, but Chris was doing damage to himself, encasing his own emotions in a dispassionate shell. "That outward calm expression has led me to be labeled as 'cold' and 'uninspiring,' and has at times hampered my ability to succeed both in my professional and personal life," says Chris, who decided to study psychology in college largely because of these impromptu therapy sessions with his dad.

Jefferson, who explains that he would marry his male partner if allowed by law, also laments that divorce "can be passed from generation to generation, like some kind of genetic defect." At the same time, he adds that some of his classmates have been determined above all *not* to repeat the divorces of their parents.

The *Newsweek* article is an important signal in our current cultural moment. The very fact that *Newsweek* made this a cover story says something. David Jefferson had a wealth of material to share, and his article deserves a wide reading.

It turns out that the children of divorce have a lot to say.

