

# Moving On

*The effect of breakup on the kids' own relationships hinges on the parent-child bond*



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Laurie Purcell's eight-year marriage ended because she was in love with the wrong man for the wrong reasons.

Her ex-husband had many of the same characteristics as her father--a fact new research shows might have benefitted Purcell's marriage had her relationship with her father been stronger. "I felt I didn't receive enough love from my dad, and therefore I felt for most of my life that I didn't deserve it," the 42-year-old Milwaukee-area woman realized with the help of counseling. "I put up with unhealthy relationships, because I didn't think I deserved better."

Can children blame an early relationship with a parent for frayed romantic and spousal relationships later in life? For *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (Hyperion, 2000), Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee tracked 100 children since the 1970s and found that they suffered the effects of their parents' divorce well into adulthood. However, other recent studies say that it's not the parents' marriage or divorce that affects children's later relationships, but the parent-child bond that is key to children's success in achieving their own satisfying adult relationships.

One study was conducted by researchers at Iowa State University's (ISU) Institute for Social and Behavioral Research. They used data from the ongoing Iowa Youth and Family Project, which began monitoring the emotional health of families in the 1980s.

Children with warm and supportive parents were more likely to have satisfying relationships later in life, the ISU study found. "Even if an effective parent is divorced or was never married, the kids should do as well as kids from two-parent families in terms of their development of romantic relationships as young adults," says study author Rand Conger, Ph.D., an ISU professor of psychology and sociology.

The 11-year ISU study tracked nearly 200 children from adolescence, interviewing them and their parents as well as videotaping and scoring their interactions with one another. The same children were interviewed again as young adults, videotaped alongside their romantic partners and scored using the same formula.

Conger argues that the factor affecting kids' later relationships the most is a disrupted parent-child relationship. But what might cause that? "Parental discord," says Paul Amato, Ph.D., a Pennsylvania State University professor whose research was published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. "In our study, it's more the direct exposure to the parents' discord that causes the problem," he says.

The PSU study of nearly 700 children found that children of openly hostile marriages fared better in later intimate relationships if their parents divorced than did children whose parents rarely fought before divorcing. The results led the researchers to conclude that, depending on the quality of the parental relationship, some children might be better off if their parents divorce, while other marriages should be saved if possible.