With two children in five now growing up in divorced families, researchers who have studied the long-term effects of marital dissolution are raising serious questions about the value of popular measures that are widely believed to ease the burden of divorce on children.

In fact, some steps long thought to be helpful, including no-fault divorce, delaying divorce until the children are older and court-ordered joint custody, may actually add to the already severe trauma many children suffer in the wake of divorce and sometimes for a decade or more after their parents' marriage ends, the studies suggest.

These concerns are emerging from research in this country and in Europe, including studies that follow families for years, starting well before signs of marital discord appear.

The commonness of divorce — half of marriages contracted in the 1970s will not last — may have reduced societal scorn and parental shame, but shows no signs of alleviating the anguish of children.

In families split by divorce, the findings suggest, children do best if both parents are consistent in their upbringing and remain physically and emotionally involved in the youngsters' development.

But the commitment and cooperation that facilitates such involvement is often lacking among divorced parents, the research indicates.

When both parents fail to maintain close parental relationships with their children after divorce, the children often do better if the father drops out of the picture altogether, a national survey of 1,423 children indicated.

Among those surveyed by Dr. Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, children from divorced families who had not seen their fathers in five years were doing better behaviorally and academically than those who had more frequent or recent paternal contacts.

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With time, many divorced fathers become increasingly detached from their children.

In a national survey, for example, the researchers were startled to discover that 23 percent of fathers had had no contact with their children in the last five years and another 20 percent had not seen their children during the preceding year.

When fathers fail to play an active role in the children's upbringing, the best predictor of their healthy adjustment after divorce is a good relationship with the custodial mother, researchers have found.

A father's financial contribution to his divorced family can also have a major effect on the children.

Many children felt abandoned by their fathers when the divorced family's finances suffered, when child support payments stopped their birthday and when fathers — often themselves professionals with advanced degrees — failed to contribute to the children's college education.

"The lack of adequate economic support has a devastating effect on the children's self-esteem and aspirations," said Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, a California psychologist who has been studying divorce since 1977. "The children are enormously angry at being lost in the shuffle. They feel they are paying for their parents' mistakes."

Wallerstein's review of seven major studies and more than a dozen smaller ones of the long-term effects of divorce on children was published in May in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

"The good news," she said, "is that by the third decade of life, a lot of kids do manage to pull their lives together, albeit after much blood, sweat and tears and often therapy."

But for about half the children of divorce, the unhappy baggage of their parents' battles remains a lasting legacy.

Wallerstein said her in-depth study of 60 middle-class families for up to 15 years after divorce revealed that since parental conflicts often center on the children, many youngsters mistakenly assume they caused their parents to split.

Others maintain a fantasy for years of bringing their parents back together, even when they know rationally that the two are ill suited or do not get along.

Furthermore, she said, the frequency of divorce has raised anxieties among children in intact families. Occasional disagreements between otherwise happily married parents often lead to fears of divorce among the children.


The book concludes, "We are allowing our children to bear the psychological, economic and moral brunt of divorce."