Here's an old bit from a stand-up comic's act: "Some say the glass is half empty. Some say it is half full. I say it's twice as big as it needs to be."

This is a story of glasses, not nearly empty, not quite full. Except that the glasses are the children of divorce--a million new ones each year in the U.S.--and what's being measured is their misery. For decades, since a pioneering study by Judith S. Wallerstein in 1971, sociologists and family-health specialists have posited that the wrenching act of divorce and its aftermath leave scars that can linger--in the afflicted children, throughout adolescence and into adulthood. This theory, buttressed by Wallerstein's 2000 best seller, The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study, helped explain so many ills--depression, juvenile delinquency, poor grades--even as it justified a flourishing victim-and-caregiver industry.

Now a widely heralded study, published this week, indicates that the glass isn't quite full but isn't cracked either. In For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered (W.W. Norton; 320 pages; $26.95), E. Mavis Hetherington, a psychology professor emeritus at the University of Virginia, and her co-author John Kelly declare that 75% to 80% of children of divorce are functioning well, with little long-term damage. The claims are sure to stir debate over the delicate, brutal decision to end a marriage. They have already riled other family researchers.

Among the findings of the study, which tracked nearly 1,400 families and more than 2,500 children, some for three decades:

--Within two years of their parents' divorce, the vast majority of children "are beginning to function reasonably well again."

--Some women and girls "turned out to be more competent, able people than if they had stayed in unhappy
family situations."

--70% of divorced parents are living happier lives than they did before divorce.

"My book tries to give a more optimistic look than people like Judith Wallerstein have done," Hetherington says. "A lot of the current work makes it sound as if you've given your kids a terminal disease when they go through a divorce. I am not pro-divorce. I think people should work harder on their marriages: support each other and weather the rough spots. And divorce is a painful experience. I've never seen a victimless divorce--where the mother, father or child didn't suffer extreme distress when the family broke up. But 75% to 80% do recover."

Hetherington found that 25% of children from divorced families have serious social, emotional or psychological problems, as opposed to 10% of kids from intact families. That's 2 1/2 times the risk--on its face, a stat worth worrying over. Hetherington acknowledges the gap between kids in nuclear and postnuclear families: "You can say, 'Wow, that's twice as big,' as some clinicians like Wallerstein do. But what it also means is that 75% of kids are functioning within the normal range. People don't focus on the resiliency of children."

In academe, people are focusing on the Hetherington-Wallerstein debate--a battle of superstars. Both women earned degrees from Berkeley (Wallerstein is also a senior lecturer emeritus there). Hetherington is 75, Wallerstein 79; both are in marriages that have lasted 40-plus years. But their methods vary sharply. Hetherington amassed data on thousands of kids; Wallerstein intimately interviewed about 60. One tactic is broad but shallow, the other deep but narrow.

"Dr. Hetherington never interviewed any child," Wallerstein says. "I've talked to children for thousands of hours. I was interested in what they think, what they wish for. And as adults, these young people were frightened of failure, frightened of commitment, afraid they were going to follow in their parents' footsteps. She doesn't have that. I don't think her study adds to our understanding of children and adults of divorce, and I'm sorry that it doesn't."

The real difference may be not in their methods (the statistician vs. the shrink) but in their temperaments (hopeful vs. fretful). Says Hetherington: "Wallerstein is fond of saying it's whether the cup is half empty or half full, but it's not. It's whether the cup is 20% to 25% empty or 75% to 80% full." She adds with a laugh, "That's a big difference."

There's a difference too between this debate and the anguish millions of parents endure, and put their kids through, while trying to decide whether to live together or apart. Compared with that, a scholarly family feud may seem a mere tempest in a teacup.
--Reported by Lisa McLaughlin/New York

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Every divorce will affect the kids involved. Many times the initial reaction is one of shock, sadness, frustration, anger, or worry. But kids also can come out of it better able to cope with stress, and many become more flexible, tolerant young adults. The most important things that both parents can do to help kids through this difficult time are: Keep visible conflict, heated discussions, and legal talk away from the kids. Minimize the disruptions to kids' daily routines. Emotional concerns, loss, and hurt following divorce take time to heal and this often happens in phases. Recognize the signs of stress. Consult your kids' teachers, doctor, or a child therapist for guidance on how to handle specific problems you're concerned about. A new study says divorce may shorten the academic career of kids from privileged families more than it does those from struggling families. "We found that parental divorce lowers the educational attainment of kids," says Jennie E. Brand, professor of sociology and statistics at UCLA, and lead author of the study. "but only among those for whom the divorce was unlikely. We interpret this to mean that the divorce was unexpected, and as such, more disruptive."

Her research indicates that a divorce among families that are usually expected to be stable—wealthy, well-educated, well-planned—is more of a disruption for the children than in families where poverty and dysfunction are the norm. Does It Matter? Over the course of the last decade or so, I have read quite a few books, and thousands of articles and studies, about divorce and the impact of divorce on kids. You don't usually have to get past the first couple of paragraphs before you can figure out where the author stands on the question of "Does divorce harm kids?" One camp argues that it is not the divorce itself which harms kids but the external factors surrounding the divorce that impact children negatively. It is as if to argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with divorce because, even if kids get hurt, it is because of the byproducts of that divorce rather than the divorce itself.