

How high is the divorce rate among autism parents?

by **Kristina Chew, PhD** on September 30th, 2007, AutismVox

The notion that divorce is “ever-increasing” is a “great myth” and also “plain wrong,” Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, assistant professors of business and public policy at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, write in an op-ed in the September 29th [New York Times](#). Responding to the release last week of new statistics on divorce and to the [New York Times](#) itself reporting that “the latest numbers suggest an uptick in the divorce rate among people married in the most recent 20 years covered in the report, 1975-1994,” Stevenson and Wolfers argue that the divorce rate has been decreasing at a steady rate over the past quarter-century:

[The divorce rate] is now at its lowest level since 1970. While marriage rates are also declining, those marriages that do occur are increasingly more stable. For instance, marriages that began in the 1990s were more likely to celebrate a 10th anniversary than those that started in the 1980s, which, in turn, were also more likely to last than marriages that began back in the 1970s.

They also point out that a count of divorce certificates shows “the divorce rate as having peaked at 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 1979 and to have fallen by 2005 to 16.7.”

Stevenson and Wolfers speak out strongly about a constantly rising increase in the divorce rate as a myth and this led me to consider the figure of 80% that is regularly cited as the divorce rate in families with an autistic child. While I have often seen the figure of [80-85%](#) referred to, I have not found a good source for this figure. That this is a topic of more than a little concern was apparent from the response to a post I wrote entitled [Divorce a common side effect of autism?](#). The post clearly touched a nerve, as did Shelley Hendrix Reynolds’ recent article on the [effects of her divorce on her autistic son](#).

Further, the [National Autism Association](#) (NAA) has launched what it refers to as the “first national program to combat divorce rates in autism community; it hopes to “confirm or update that percentage [of 80%] before referencing it in its program materials.” And, the “toll” that the “stress” of raising an autistic child can take on a marriage has more recently been in the news due to [Jenny McCarthy](#) who said during her [Oprah](#) appearance on September 18th:

Soon after Evan’s diagnosis, Jenny says the stress of raising a child with autism began to take a toll on her marriage. An autism advocacy organization reports that the divorce rate within the autism community is staggering. According to its research, 80 percent of all marriages end.

“I believe it, because I lived it,” she says. “I felt very alone in my marriage.”

Jenny says her husband dealt with his pain by staying away, even when Evan was in the hospital. “He never sat down and said, ‘What did you find out on Google?’” she says. “There was never that connection of wanting to know and being there.”

When Jenny’s marriage ended, she says she felt sad...and scared. “After the divorce, even though it felt good and the right thing to do, I felt, as I’m sure many mothers with children who have autism feel, ‘Who in the heck is going to love me with my child who has autism?’” she says. “I don’t care how big your boobs are or blonde your hair is—you’re going to feel that way.”

Leaving aside the attributes that McCarthy seems to equate with attracting the opposite sex (though I will note I would not, by the qualifications she mentions, get anywhere, not that I need or wish to; I’m Chinese American on both sides and nary a blonde hair to speak of), she does seem to be pinpoint autism as the reason for her marriage ending, and highlights what seems to be her ex-husband’s lack of interest.

Citing autism as the reason for a marriage failing can be seen as yet another reason for saying why autism is so awful. Taking care of Charlie is a privilege but it is not always easy. Childcare arrangements are a constant juggling act for Jim and me and we tend always to think of Charlie’s needs first, and of each other’s after that. We both agree that it should be this way. Jim and I would much prefer living closer to New York City due to our jobs but Charlie’s education comes first. We left the house that we planned to live in for 30 years in order that Charlie could have the right school placement. (And until this September we were living with my in-laws, which was very, if not *too*, interesting at times.) Jim and I have made many of our choices based on “what Charlie needs” rather than on what would be best for the two of us and I do hope that, ultimately this will be best for the three of us.

Stevenson and Wolfers suggest some reasons for why the “myth” of “ever-increasing divorce” persists.

Why has the great divorce myth persisted so powerfully? Reporting on our families is a lot like reporting on the economy: statistical tales of woe provide the foundation for reform proposals. The only difference is that conservatives use these data to make the case for greater government intervention in the marriage market, while liberals use them to promote deregulation of marriage.

But a useful family policy should instead be based on facts. The facts are that divorce is down, and today’s marriages are more stable than they have been in decades. Perhaps it is worth stocking up on silver anniversary cards after all.

Maybe it sounds like a cliché, but life with autism has made Jim and Charlie and I, and Jim and I, a tighter unit; a *unit*, cohesive, [symbiotic](#), and together. We’ll see you in 2020.*