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The case for two-parent families

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The traditional, biological two-parent family is by all measures still the best means for raising children. That such a seemingly commonsense viewpoint has to be argued for shows how far anti-family groups have influenced the agenda on family issues. Forces hostile to the family argue that the traditional family is not important for the health of children.

This Resource Paper is adapted from a paper by Bill Muehlenberg first presented to the Thomas More Centre in May 1993 and published in *The Australian Family* June 1993. It presents the evidence that, by every indicator, two parents are the key to the healthy development of a child.

Battleground of the Nineties

For centuries, the biological family with mother and father was viewed as the appropriate and necessary structure for raising children and undergirding society. But today the two-parent family is not only viewed as a relic of a past age, but is even seen as hindering the development of a fully enlightened and liberated society. Radical feminists and the gay lobby are but two groups which are bent on destroying or recasting the traditional family.

Indeed, the attempt to redefine and minimise the importance of the traditional or biological family is a major battleground of the Nineties. This can be demonstrated by a few examples.

The United Nations has declared 1994 to be The International Year of the Family and the official UN guidelines include the following statement:

"The family constitutes the basic unit of society and therefore warrants special attention." So far so good. But it continues: "Families assume diverse forms and functions from one country to another, and within each nation society... Consequently, the International Year of the Family encompasses and addresses the needs of all families. Changes in social structures... have meant that there are many different types of family structure, with different strengths and weaknesses." This means that "any image of what constitutes the 'ideal family' will differ greatly. Policies affecting the family should seek to avoid promoting, implicitly or explicitly, a single, ideal image of the family."

This sentiment was echoed recently by Don Edgar, director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. At a Family Summit held in Canberra in November 1992, Edgar said, "There is no optimal form of family life," and he referred to his own single-parent family background as proof of this.

However, the Australian Family Association considers the following definitions to be fundamental:

- **marriage** as defined in the Marriage Act 1961 and the Family Law Act as "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others voluntarily entered into for life" and
- **family** defined as an organic unit composed essentially of father, mother and children; in a wider but still necessary relationship, of grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles; a kinship group of human beings linked by ties of blood, marriage and adoption, structured to bear and rear children, to care for the young, the sick and the old and other human needs.

Single-parent families

The case for the two-parent family is not about knocking single parent families. To highlight the importance of the two-parent family is not to denigrate those who find themselves - often through no fault of their own - in the position of being single-parents.

Because of the death or desertion of a spouse, for example, many single parents find themselves valiantly seeking to raise their children as best they can. We can only support and encourage such single parents in every possible manner. But those who deliberately choose to have children without a spouse are doing so at great risk to both themselves and their children.

My argument does not claim that two-parent families are always without vice and single-parent families are always without virtue. One can always find exceptions.

I am seeking to argue, however, that a growing body of evidence suggests that the best way to ensure the healthy development of children is in the setting of the biological two-parent family. By a number of indicators, children from intact, stable two-parent families will do much better than children from broken homes or single parent families.

Effects of family breakdown

Princeton University Professor of Sociology Sara McLanahan has extensively studied the effects of divorce on children. This is how she summarises the research conducted over the last several decades:

"Until the early 1980s, many analysts as well as lay persons believed that divorce had no negative consequences for children, beyond the temporary stress associated with family disruption. This belief emerged during the 1970s, when divorce rates were at their peak, and legitimated the new ideology that children's interests are best served when their parents pursue their own personal happiness.

"Since 1980 a number of studies based on large, nationally representative surveys have challenged this view by showing that divorce is associated with a number of long-term negative outcomes in children. While there is not definite proof that divorce itself causes lower attainment in children, there are good theoretical reasons for believing that it reduces the quantity and quality of parental investment, which in turn reduces the children's well-being."¹

McLanahan goes on to list some of the studies mentioned. Such research indicates that children from mother-only families:

- "obtain fewer years of education and are more likely to drop out of high school than offspring from intact families";
- are more likely to have "lower educational attainment and lower socio-economic status";
- are more likely to "marry early and have children early, both in and out of wedlock";
- and are more likely to "commit delinquent acts and to engage in drug and alcohol use."²

Socio-economic circumstances

This is perhaps the least controversial area. There is widespread agreement that single parents (usually women) and children face severe economic consequences due to divorce or illegitimacy. Numerous studies have shown that single parents and their children are much worse off economically than parents and children of intact families. Here are just some of the findings.

Harvard University professor Lenore Weitzman found that, on average, women with dependent children experienced a 73 per cent decline in standards of living during the first year after divorce whereas their husbands experienced a 42 per cent increase in their standard of living. She predicted that a two-tier society would emerge with women and children as an underclass.³

Sara McLanahan concludes from numerous studies that "mother-only families have substantially higher poverty rates than other groups... and children in mother-only families are much more likely to be poor than children in two-parent families, in terms of both absolute income levels and income stability."⁴

This "feminisation of poverty" is clearly demonstrated by US census statistics. While the poverty rate for all families rose from 10.7 per cent in 1990 to 11.5 per cent in 1991, married-couple families continued to have the lowest poverty rate - 6.0 per cent in 1991. Mother-only families represented 12.7 per cent of non-poor families, but 54.0 per cent of poor families in 1991. Among families with dependent children, only 8.3 per cent of married couples were living below the poverty line, compared with 47.1 per cent of female-headed households.

In Australia, a new study of 500 divorces with children five to eight years after the separation found that four in five divorced mothers were dependent on social security after their marriages dissolved. Also, mothers still suffer income losses of up to 26 per cent five to eight years after divorce.⁵

When US vice-president Dan Quayle criticised television character Murphy Brown in 1992 for viewing out-of-wedlock births as just another lifestyle choice, journalists should have read the speech in which these remarks were made. In addition to quoting the above kinds of statistics, he noted the tragic situation in the black community. For example, in 1967, 68 per cent of black families were headed by married couples. In 1991 this figure dropped to only 48 per cent. In 1965, the illegitimacy rate among black families was 28 per cent. In 1989 the figure was 65 per cent.

Quayle cited other figures about poverty in broken families and then made this comment: "For those concerned about children growing up in poverty we should know this: marriage is probably the best antipoverty program of all." The evidence certainly supports this view.

Educational performance

How do children from broken, single-parent family homes fare educationally compared with children from intact, two-parent families?

A number of studies show that children from mother-only families obtain fewer years of education and are far more likely to drop out of high school than children from intact families.^{6,7, 8,9,10,11,12}

For example, children from intact families where the mother has not completed high school have a 21 per cent chance of dropping out of high school whereas children from broken families where the mother has not completed high school have a 46 per cent chance of dropping out of high school.¹³

A longitudinal study of 5,000 British children born in 1946 found that children who had experienced parental divorce showed lower educational attainment and lower socio-economic status in their mid-twenties than children whose parents had remained married and children who had lost a parent through death.¹⁴

A Cambridge study of children born in 1958 concluded that the chance of a child going to university is halved by a parental divorce. The study noted that these effects are either weaker or nonexistent when a father has died."

A study of the proportion of adolescents aged between 14 to 17 who graduate from high school found that 85 per cent of those living in intact families graduate, compared with just 67 per cent

of peers living in single-parent homes, 65 per cent of peers living in step-families, and 52 per cent of peers living with neither parent.¹⁶

Moreover, evidence is mounting that the presence of fathers strongly impacts on the educational performance of children.

Extensive work by Henry Biller, of the University of Rhode Island, shows that "among lower-class junior high and high school children, those who became father-absent before the age of five, and particularly before the age of two, generally scored significantly lower on measures of IQ (Otis Quick Test) and achievement (Stanford Achievement Test)."¹⁷

A major study commissioned by the US National Association of Elementary School Principals of 18,000 students in 14 states concluded that "one-parent children on the whole show lower achievement in school than do their two-parent classmates."¹⁸

A University of Illinois study noted that "even after taking into account the lower income in single-parent families, the absence of a father has a significant negative effect on the education attainment of boys."¹⁹

It is clear that a child from a two-parent family will tend to do better and stay longer in education than a child from a non-intact family.

Criminal involvement

A number of studies show a very real connection between delinquent or criminal behaviour and broken families.^{20,21,22}

For example, a study found that teenage girls in divorced families committed more delinquent acts (eg, drug users' larceny, skipping school) than their counterparts in intact families.²³ Another study of male and female youth aged 12-17 found that adolescents in mother-only households were more likely to engage in deviant acts.²⁴

A recent book on American street-gangs reported that most gang members come from female-headed households.²⁵ And a study of British communities found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime, including mugging, violence against strangers, car theft and burglary.²⁶

Indeed, the very absence of intact families makes gang membership appealing. As Dan Quayle remarked, the gang members he visited all viewed the gang as a kind of surrogate family. Many gang members said "It was like having a family." "Like family" - unfortunately, that says it all" said Quayle.²⁷

A 1985 study found that "90 per cent of repeat adolescent firestarters live in a mother-only constellation".²⁸ A study of adolescent murderers discovered that 75 per cent of them had divorced or never-married parents.²⁹ And a study of violent rapists, all repeat offenders, found that 60 per cent came from single-parent homes.³⁰

A study which tracked every child born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai in 1955 for 30 years found that five out of six delinquents with an adult criminal record came from families where a parent - almost always the father - was absent.³¹

An American author, reviewing the evidence, writes: "Poverty alone does not explain all of these effects. Indeed, poverty may not explain any of them."³² He cites a study which analysed victimisation data on over 11,000 individuals from three urban areas in New York, Florida and Missouri, which reached this startling conclusion: the proportion of single-parent households in a community predicts its rates of violent crime and burglary, but the community's poverty level does not. Neither poverty nor race seem to account very much for the crime rate, compared to the proportion of single parent families."

In Australia, a new book by Alan Tapper highlights this connection between broken families and crime. In a study of rising crime rates in Western Australia, Tapper suggests that "the evidence of a causal relation (of family breakdown) to crime is strong."³⁴

Even researchers who are wary of making a connection between broken families and crime have conceded that some relationship exists between the two. For example, a review of dozens of studies observed: "A tentative conclusion based on the evidence reviewed here is that antisocial behaviour is less likely to occur in families where two adults are present, whether as

biological parents, step-parents, or some combination of biological parents and other adults.”³⁵

Involvement with drugs

Drug usage is also higher among those who come from broken homes. Independent studies have found that offspring from non-intact families are more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use than offspring from two-parent families.^{36, 37, 38, 39}

Fathers, it seems, play a particularly important role in prevention of drug use. A University of California study concluded that, although “mothers are more active than fathers in helping youngsters with personal problems... with regard to youthful drug users, (the) father’s involvement is more important.” Among the homes with strict fathers, only 18 per cent use alcohol or drugs at all. In contrast, among mother-dominated homes, 35 per cent had children who used drugs frequently.⁴⁰

Certainly children from two-parent homes are not immune to the lure of drugs, but their chances of taking them are clearly minimised.

Mental and emotional well-being

Judith Wallerstein has done some of the most important work in the area of the relationship between children of divorce and emotional and psychological ill-health. Her 1980 study with Joan Kelly, recorded in *Surviving the Breakup*, looked at 60 divorced families over a five year period.⁴¹ Some of the findings include:

- Over 90 per cent of the children initially felt “an acute sense of shock, intense fears, and grieving which the children found overwhelming.”
- Half the children feared being abandoned forever by the parent who had left, and they were preoccupied with the fear of waking to find both parents gone.
- Despondency, rejection, anger and guilt were common feelings which a significant number of children felt.
- Five years after the divorce 37 per cent of the children were intensely unhappy and very depressed.

A follow-up study by Wallerstein and Blakeslee, called *Second Chances* traces the original families ten and fifteen years on.⁴² This study found that many of the kids, now teens and adults, were still feeling the effects of their parents’ divorces.

Ten years on, 41 per cent of them were worried, underachieving, self-deprecating and angry young men and women. Many could not enter into stable, intimate relationships of their own, and if marriage was entered into, they seemed much more vulnerable to divorce. Young women especially found it difficult to form lasting relationships with men.

These findings of long-lasting feelings of rejection, rage, disappointment, guilt and confusion among children of divorce are echoed in other studies.^{43, 44, 45}

Armand Nicholi, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, concludes that “the absence of a parent through death, divorce, or a time-demanding job contributes to the many forms of emotional disorders, especially the anger, rebelliousness, low self-esteem, depression, and antisocial behaviour that characterises those adolescents who take drugs, become pregnant out of wedlock, or commit suicide.

“Other studies have found that children of divorce make up an estimated 60 per cent of child patients in clinical treatments and 80 to 100 per cent of adolescents in in-patient mental hospital settings.

“Research indicates clearly that a broken home with the resultant loss or absence of a parent predisposes a child to a variety of emotional disorders that manifest themselves immediately or later in the child’s life.”⁴⁶

The gross over-representation of children of divorce in psychiatric clinics and hospitals is confirmed by other studies. Preschool children admitted to two New Orleans hospitals as psychiatric patients included nearly 80 per cent from fatherless homes. Teenagers discharged from Canadian psychiatric hospitals included only 16 per cent who were living with both parents when they were admitted. Studies from nations as diverse as Finland and South Africa report that 50 to 80 per cent of psychiatric patients come from broken homes.⁴⁷

Physical health and mortality

The physical health of children also tends to be negatively affected by parental divorce. For example, a national survey found that children of divorced parents suffered significantly worse health than the children of intact marriages. Research from Rutgers University found that “single mothers report poorer overall physical health for their children.”⁴⁸

Illegitimacy also seems to result in more health problems for children. For example, a study found that unmarried women run “a substantially higher risk of having infants with very low or moderately low birth weights” compared with married mothers.⁴⁹

US statistics show that the mortality rates of babies born in 1989 stood at 13.1 deaths per 1,000 single births for unmarried white mothers, compared with only 7.8 for married white mothers. Among black mothers, the comparable infant-mortality rates were 19.6 and 14.6 per 1,000 single births, respectively.⁵⁰

Says one commentator who has studied the figures: “Regardless of race, age, or income of its mother, a child is more likely to die in infancy if born out of wedlock. Even a mother’s education matters less than her marital status: infant-mortality rates are higher for children of unmarried mothers who are college graduated than of married high-school dropouts.”

Suicide

Suicide rates also tend to be higher amongst those from broken homes. For example, a statistically significant incidence of separation and divorce has been observed in the families of adolescents who attempt suicide as compared with control groups.⁵¹

The increase in suicides in America has been linked to the proliferation of single-parent households. Youths who attempted suicide differed little in terms of age, income, race and religion, but were “more likely to live in nonintact family settings.”⁵²

Recently a Flinders University professor of social sciences reported that research shows a very close link between suicidal behaviour and parent-child relationships.⁵³

Children having children

Children from mother-only families are more likely to marry early and have children early, both in and out of wedlock, and are more likely to divorce. Also, age at the first marriage will be lower for the children of divorced parents who marry, when sex, age and maternal education are controlled.^{54, 55, 56, 57}

As just one example, a recent British study found that girls brought up by lone parents were twice as likely to leave home by the age of 18 as the daughters of intact homes. They were three times as likely to be cohabiting by the age of 20. They were almost three times as likely to have a birth out of wedlock.⁵⁸

Social costs

The social costs of broken homes and illegitimacy are very great. Individual choices have public consequences. Family disruption and illegitimacy erode the tax base, drive up the nation’s medical bills, and create higher costs for the institutional care of the sick and elderly. For example, it is estimated that every unwed teen mother in America costs the taxpayer \$100,000 in medical and welfare costs. One study found that Americans were paying “uncounted billions of dollars” to care for divorced and single people who stay in hospitals longer than married people with the same illnesses. Another study noted that unmarried mothers and their children “disproportionately constitute a population which is chronically dependent on the state for basic necessities, including health care.”⁵⁹

In Australia it has been estimated that marriage breakdown costs \$2.5 billion annually. Each separation is estimated to cost society some \$12,000.⁶⁰ Also, Australian industry is reported to lose production of more than \$1 billion a year due to problems of family breakdown.⁶¹

Clearly, family breakdown exerts a huge social cost in addition to many personal costs.

Child abuse

Evidence indicates that children at greatest risk of child abuse are not those in normal, two-parent families, but those in broken homes. A 1985 study found that when all the variables of class

and maternal age are accounted for, "preschoolers in stepparent-natural parent homes... are estimated to be 40 times as likely to become abuse statistics as like-age children living with two natural parents."⁶²

In a study of child abuse cases in which there were children of a previous marriage, it was observed that only step-children were abused and not the natural children.⁶³

It has been found that children in single-parent households are especially vulnerable to abuse, often at the hands of their mother's boyfriends.⁶⁴ Also Mr Brian Burdekin, Australia's Human Rights Commissioner, has reported a 500 to 600 per cent increase in sexual abuse of girls in families where the adult male was not the natural father.⁶⁵

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence presented above that a very strong case can be made for the two-parent family.

While researchers will differ on details of both the results and interpretations of the various studies in this field, it is becoming clear that an ever-growing amount of data and research is

confirming what most of us knew as a matter of common sense and experience: the best thing you can give a child is its biological mother and father.

Broadly speaking, several trends can be observed.

- A child's development, by every indicator, is best served in the context of a natural, two-parent home.
- The absence of a parent is more devastating for a child than poverty or bad neighbours.
- Single-parent families are more likely to produce a new generation which has similar or even worse problems than the last.

So the next time you hear someone saying that all types of household arrangements are equally acceptable, you will know that a tremendous amount of research shows such a statement to be patently false.

The reckless comments heard and read almost daily need to be challenged. Even a recent Melbourne *Age* editorial was opining that: "There is no reason for believing any type of relationship is objectively better or worse than any other, and there is no good reason for discriminating in favour of, or against, any type of relationship." Such nonsense can now finally be put to rest.

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