

Chapter 3: Family

Improving the family environment in which children are raised is vital to any serious effort to reduce poverty and expand opportunity. Twenty-five years of extensive and rigorous research has shown that children raised in stable, secure families have a better chance to flourish.⁵⁷ Family structure is an important factor in reducing poverty, too: children raised in single-parent families are nearly five times as likely to be poor as those in married-couple families.⁵⁸ In part, this is the result of simple math: two parents, on average, have far greater resources to devote to raising children than does one parent attempting to raise children alone. "Social policy faces an uphill battle," says Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution, "as long as families continue to fragment and children are deprived of the resources of two parents."⁵⁹

Marriage is more than an instrumental good; it is more than a mechanism through which households receive two incomes. Marriage matters. Marital commitment remains the principal foundation upon which most Americans can build a stable and secure family. Of course, this isn't true for everybody. Marriage doesn't automatically deliver what children most need—a stable and secure environment with two engaged, committed, and nurturing parents—but it certainly offers the most reliable means to achieve those ends.

What can policymakers do to promote strong, stable, and committed families? Clearly these are difficult areas for

development; that deferring childbearing until individuals are ready for parenthood matters; that engaged parenting matters; and that responsible fatherhood matters along with responsible motherhood.

PROMOTING MARRIAGE

Family structure shapes child outcomes. A child raised by two parents outperforms a peer raised in a single-parent family on key developmental, educational, behavioral, and employment-related outcomes, controlling for other factors.⁶⁰ All else equal, two sets of hands to help, hold, provide, and instruct are clearly better than one.

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policy, since they involve deeply personal choices and values. Many of the challenges are about culture more than legislation or programs. We believe nonetheless that there is a role for government, educational institutions, and opinion leaders. Our group has reached agreement on four cornerstones of a pro-family, pro-opportunity agenda. We need to:

- 1) Promote marriage as the most reliable route to family stability and resources;
- 2) Promote delayed, responsible childbearing;
- 3) Promote parenting skills and practices, especially among low-income parents; and
- 4) Promote skill development, family involvement, and employment among young men as well as women.

We acknowledge the practical and political difficulties that public policies related to family life entail. But we also believe that policymakers and public leaders have a responsibility to frankly and openly address these issues and the policies related to them. Taken together, our proposals will send a strong message that marriage matters as a route to family stability and improved child

Parents who are married are much more likely to stay together and provide a stable environment; it should be no surprise, then, that children raised by married couples do much better in life. A recent study by Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution (a member of our group) compared economic mobility by the income quintile in which children began their lives and found substantial differences between children of married and unmarried parents.⁶¹ Four out of five children who started out in the bottom quintile, but who were raised by parents married throughout their childhood, rose out of the bottom quintile as adults. In fact, such children born into the bottom quintile were more likely to rise to the top quintile (19 percent) than remain at the bottom (17 percent). In contrast, children raised in the bottom income quintile by a parent who remained unmarried throughout their childhood had a 50 percent chance of remaining there and only a 5 percent chance of reaching the top quintile.⁶² In another recent study, Raj Chetty of Harvard and his colleagues found that the share of single-parent families in a particular geographic area was more strongly and negatively correlated

with rates of upward economic mobility among residents than any other factor—including parents' income, level of education, or race.⁶³ Likewise, the share of a local population that was married was positively associated with upward mobility rates.

A note of caution is needed here: these relationships are correlations, with no necessary causal implications, as the studies' authors point out. Some scholars argue that children raised in two-parent families do better for reasons unrelated to family structure or marital status.⁶⁴ One obvious possibility is that two-parent families, especially married ones, have more money. Married parents may also be more engaged in child rearing. Once we take such factors into account, the influence of family structure, including marriage, does diminish. But it doesn't disappear: disparities associated with family structure remain even after controlling for these factors.⁶⁵ A related argument is that the positive benefits that appear to flow from marriage are the result of "selection effects." Adults who possess certain characteristics, such as trustworthiness or perseverance, may be more inclined to marry, and children raised by adults with these characteristics may do better. If this is the case, the factors causing marriage are also improving children's outcomes.

It is difficult to disentangle these effects. In any case, there's a danger of simply going round in circles. It may well be true, for example, that cohabiting biological parents who remain together in a committed relationship while raising their children are very similar to married couples with the same characteristics. But not many cohabiting couples in the U.S. are like this. The evidence shows that in the U.S., marriage is clearly the best path to stability—it is the strongest predictor of stable, two-parent families. Indeed, two-thirds of cohabiting parents have split up before their child reaches the age of 12, compared to only a quarter of married parents.⁶⁶ Marriage itself is likely to serve as a "mechanism by which parents support a mutual commitment to invest intensively in their children's human capital."⁶⁷ Following a recent, comprehensive review of the literature, marriage scholar David Ribar identified a range of means through which marriage can bolster

child wellbeing, including income, assets, time availability, economies of scale, specialization, and stability. Improving any of these factors independently of marriage would be good for children, but would be "at best, partial substitutes." Ribar concludes that "the advantages of marriage for children appear to be the sum of many, many parts."⁶⁸

Stronger families are an important step toward greater opportunity and less poverty, and marriage is an important step toward a stronger family. Obviously, strengthening families will not by itself solve America's poverty and economic mobility problems. Major changes in employment and education policy (which we discuss in Chapters 4 and 5) are also necessary. But improvements in employment and education without stronger families won't suffice. We need progress on all three fronts.

So what can be done? We've said that marriage matters. But past government efforts to encourage unmarried parents to marry have not proven very effective.⁶⁹ Promoting marriage to strengthen American families isn't primarily an issue of specific policies or programs in any case: it's in large part a question of culture. Political leaders, educators, and civic leaders—from both the political left and right—need to be clear and direct about how hard it is to raise children without a committed co-parent. We've effectively reduced major public health problems, such as smoking and teen pregnancy, through changes in cultural attitudes facilitated by public information campaigns. According to a review of the research by contraception expert Adam Thomas, mass media campaigns about the consequences of unprotected sex have reduced unplanned pregnancies.⁷⁰ We propose a campaign of similar scope to emphasize the value of committed co-parenting and marriage.

It's not a small thing for leaders to be clear in this way—cultural norms are influenced by the messages leaders send. Major cultural norms have been changed many times before when leaders expressed firm and unequivocal views about even entrenched cultural attitudes, including norms surrounding civil rights and gay rights. Presidents, politicians, church leaders, newspaper

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columnists, business leaders, educators, and friends should all join in telling young people that raising kids jointly with the children's other parent is more likely to lead to positive outcomes than raising a child alone.

This message can be communicated through public information campaigns and repeated by local and national leaders. In the same way that leading institutions advise us to abstain from smoking, eat healthy foods, get plenty of exercise, read to our children, volunteer, give to charity, wear seatbelts, and finish school, they should advise young people to postpone having a child until they have a stable partner and are ready to be parents. For the overwhelming majority, that means marriage. America's college graduates (whose nonmarital birth rate is less than 9 percent, compared to more than 50 percent for women with a high school degree or less) appear to have been influenced by a cultural expectation concerning the advisability of raising children with a committed partner. They know that extensive evidence supports the advantages of married-couple families.⁷¹ We should not be afraid to preach what we practice.

PROMOTING DELAYED, RESPONSIBLE CHILDBEARING

As we showed in Chapter 2, nonmarital and unplanned births have been increasing dramatically for several decades. About 40 percent of all American children are now born outside marriage, and in about 70 percent of such births to women under 30, the mothers report the pregnancies were unplanned. Even if a couple is cohabiting, the chances they will separate by the time their child is five is about three times greater than the chances of a split among married parents.⁷²

Nonmarital births are not equally likely among all subgroups in the population. Nonmarital births are much more common among minority couples and couples with less education. Women with less than a high school education, for example, are around ten times more likely to have a nonmarital birth than are women with a college degree.⁷³

As we've seen, children born outside marriage are approximately five times more likely to be poor than children born to married couples. Moreover, research shows that children in mother-headed families are more likely to fail in school, get arrested during their teen years, have poor mental health, use drugs and alcohol, and receive welfare as young adults, thereby increasing the chances that poverty and the problems associated with it will pass on to the next generation. Of course many children born outside marriage do fine. But on average they face much worse odds. Thus reducing the rate of nonmarital and unplanned births would raise the average income of families with children, lower poverty rates, and improve child development.

Since the Food and Drug Administration approved the first birth control pill in 1960, many married and unmarried couples have been able to control the timing of their births. Both public funding for birth control and private funding by health insurance plans have increased over time. Meanwhile, a number of studies have shown that state-level and local programs emphasizing the most effective forms of birth control can reduce nonmarital and unplanned pregnancies and births, as well as abortion rates.⁷⁴ Although some of these studies are large-scale, most are not based on random assignment, the gold standard research design. The one exception, conducted by the Bixby Center at the University of California, San Francisco, found results

similar to those of the other large-scale studies, including a reduction of about half in the number of maternal reports of unplanned pregnancies.

Taken together, these studies give us solid evidence that programs that provide counseling, offer a range of birth control measures including long-acting forms, and provide the services free can substantially reduce pregnancy rates among sexually active couples, including teenage and low-income couples, and enable them to avoid or plan childbearing.

Still, these programs remain controversial for several reasons. The most effective contraception methods have proven to be Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives (LARCs). They include injections, intrauterine devices (IUDs), and subdermal contraceptive implants. They remove any need for users to take daily actions or actions at the time of intercourse. These methods (unlike some IUDs of an earlier era) have so far proven to be quite safe and effective. But they do require medical personnel to directly administer the contraceptive to young women, and in many cases to remove them as well. In addition, opponents are concerned that the counseling offered by these programs amounts to the government nudging teen and low-income women towards using a form of contraception over which they have much less direct control than condoms or the birth control pill. Moreover, some opponents argue that part of the effectiveness of IUDs and similar devices comes from interfering with the capacity of a fertilized egg to be implanted in the uterine wall and see it as potentially a form of abortion. Supporters of LARCs argue that such programs are designed to provide information and that they actually reduce later abortions significantly.

Our group was somewhat divided as a result. The majority support programs of this type, and urge states and local governments to take steps to ensure that women and men, both single and married, are aware of their options for planning pregnancies and births and have easy access to programs that help them do so. But some were

opposed to using government support that encourages young women to take LARCs.

Throughout this report we've emphasized the importance of individual responsibility. In this case, we emphasize the importance of what might be called couple responsibility. The contraceptive methods by which births can be planned are now diverse, highly effective, and widely available. It would be better for couples, for children, and for society if prospective parents plan their births and have children only when they are financially stable, are in a committed relationship (preferably marriage), and can provide a stable environment for their child.

PROMOTING BETTER PARENTING

Raising kids is challenging for all, but some parents do a better job than others. Children in America face a large "parenting gap," where some children receive significant quality time and attention from their parents, while others receive less. This gap affects their odds of success both in childhood and later in life. Increasing the share of two-parent families would make effective parenting easier, but we should also take on parenting practices directly.

Research suggests that differences in parenting explain roughly a third of the income-related gaps in child development.⁷⁵ Policy should ensure that low-income parents can get guidance on developing their parenting skills to enhance their children's social, physical, and cognitive growth. The government isn't an effective parent, and it shouldn't dictate to parents how to raise a child. But government can play a positive role by providing guidance, almost always through a third party receiving government funding, on the practices and skills that fit best with the high aspirations that parents hold for their children. In that spirit, we support evidence-backed programs to help low-income parents nurture their children effectively.

Evidence-based home visiting programs, such as those funded federally through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV), can help

low-income parents in this regard. Though MIECHV funds a number of strong programs, the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) has shown particularly compelling results, and it illustrates why we think these programs hold promise. NFP involves several visits from a registered nurse to the homes of first-time, single mothers, both during and after pregnancy. During pregnancy, nurses provide education and guidance on diet, substance abuse, and other factors that could affect the health of the fetus. After delivery, the nurses help mothers better care for their children by teaching them about parent-child interactions, health, safety and cognitive development. Education and counseling also focus on the mother's health and self-sufficiency.

NFP has generated positive and long-lasting effects for both mothers and their children. In general, participants have had fewer subsequent pregnancies (and longer intervals between those pregnancies), relied less on public benefits, and stayed with their current partners for longer periods of time. Their children demonstrated higher levels of cognitive development and fewer behavioral problems than their peers who didn't receive the NFP intervention. These effects on children, unlike effects from many other early childhood studies, were still detectable after many years. Relative to their peers who did not receive NFP, children born to mothers with low psychological resources scored higher in reading and math at age 12; at age 15, youths who had participated in NFP reported fewer instances of running away and

arrests, and their parents reported fewer behavioral problems related to alcohol and drugs; and at age 19, females who participated in NFP were less likely to have been involved with the criminal justice system.⁷⁶ Other programs funded through MIECHV have shown significant and lasting results that also pass a cost-benefit test.⁷⁷

We encourage continued federal support for MIECHV, and we urge an even sharper focus on identifying and supporting the evidence-based models that show the greatest success and cost-benefit payoff. MIECHV allocates 75 percent of its grant dollars to evidence-backed programs. We urge states to do the same. Currently, states themselves devote nearly one billion dollars to programs with similar intentions. But the share of state funds tied to the adoption of evidence-based models is too small, and locally favored programs and providers too often beat out models that would serve parents and children more effectively.⁷⁸

Parenting is important. The parenting gap helps explain why achievement gaps between children from poor families and children from better-off families are well entrenched before children ever set foot in the classroom or apply for their first job.⁷⁹ Except in cases of abuse or neglect, the government cannot and should not raise a child. But government should provide guidance to low-income parents who want to nurture their children more effectively. And it should allocate dollars in a way that recognizes the value of better parenting to society, to parents, and to children.

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RECONNECTING DISCONNECTED MEN

Public assistance programs for low-income Americans have focused on single-mother households for good reason: we have a social obligation to ensure that children in poverty have a minimum standard of living, and poor children disproportionately live in households headed by a single mother. We believe such efforts are vital and should be maintained and strengthened. Yet policy has tended to ignore men, other than expecting them to pay child support. If we believe that children need a stable and secure home with two loving and nurturing parents, fathers need to be taken seriously. Improving family life in America requires that we more effectively help disconnected men and women gain their footing in the labor market, and that we help non-resident fathers financially contribute to and constructively participate in their families.

As we discuss in detail in our chapters on work (Chapter 4) and education (Chapter 5), men who lack a college degree have experienced large declines in employment and earnings. These declines are bad not only for men—they’re bad for women and children as well. They’ve made marriage less appealing to women, especially in low-income communities, because young men with little education and uneven employment records tend to contribute less to a household’s financial health. Reversing those declines may be the least controversial way to restore the benefits of marriage to more low-income families.

Enhancing wage subsidies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for childless adults and non-custodial parents could help. Both President Obama and Congressman Paul Ryan have proposed a significant increase in the EITC for adults without dependent children as a means to improve employment among disconnected men.⁸⁰ Improving the federal EITC so that it is more generous to low-income childless adults and non-custodial parents should be a priority not only to reverse declines in earnings and labor force participation, but to promote family stability as well.

Enhancing the EITC would also help reduce the imbalance between the support we provide for poor single mothers and the very modest support we provide to non-resident fathers in the same economic position. Current policy understandably offers more support to the custodial parent, typically the mother, than to the absent parent, usually the father. For example, a single mother with two children working 30 hours a week at an \$8-per-hour job is likely to receive annual benefits of \$5,495 from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), \$4,990 in federal EITC payments, up to \$2,000 through the Child Tax Credit (up to \$1,422 is refundable through the Additional Child Tax Credit), and health care coverage that could reasonably be valued at \$4,101 depending on her state of residence. Child support collections, school lunch and breakfast, and child care subsidies can provide additional resources.⁸¹

By contrast, a nonresident father working the same job and living in the same area is likely to receive only \$1,655 annually from SNAP, \$179 from the federal EITC, and possibly some help with health insurance depending on where he lives. But he also is likely to have a child support obligation that would reduce his income and increase the mother’s. Collectively, the benefits provided to the single mother can almost double what she earns, while the nonresident father is eligible for little more than SNAP and a minimal EITC benefit. Discussions about family and poverty must focus more attention on encouraging more work among poor, nonresident fathers—not just among the single mothers of their children.

To help nonresident fathers better provide for their children, improving responsible fatherhood programs should also be a priority. Federal and state policy already requires fathers to take financial responsibility for their children, but we should help fathers realize that goal. Many state child support agencies now operate work programs to which men who owe child support and fail to work can be assigned. Some of these programs have shown promising results and should be encouraged. Demonstration projects such as Parents’ Fair Share (PFS), Fathers

at Work, and Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) have improved employment, earnings, and child support payments among participants.⁸² However, the gains were modest, and in some cases the evaluations weren't rigorous. Programming for poor, non-resident fathers can be difficult. We need to develop and evaluate quality programs and expand those that have strong results. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement is currently evaluating work demonstration programs in eight states. One well-evaluated work program has already shown evidence that it can increase both work and child support payments.⁸³ It follows that other states should implement this promising approach and the programs that produce the biggest impacts on fathers' work in the demonstration programs.⁸⁴

We also propose changing the way states set child support orders and collect payments from low-income, nonresident parents to help them better provide regular financial support for their children. Many unmarried fathers have children before they are financially able to support a family. Some cohabit with the mother while their children are young, but these relationships are often short lived. Others never form a unit resembling the traditional family. These fathers tend to have much lower incomes than do fathers who marry before childbirth. When men become nonresident fathers, their ability to provide financial support improves very little over time. One recent study estimates that almost 10 percent of nonresident fathers pay such a large share of their income in child support that they can meet their full obligations only by skimping on personal expenses such as rent, utilities, and transportation to work.⁸⁵ We are concerned that the child support obligation not only creates a work disincentive, but that less work by these fathers would reduce the effectiveness of our recommendation to increase the EITC for them.

Overdue child support payments are concentrated among lower-income, nonresident fathers. The penalties that induce higher-income fathers to pay can result in mounting debts for lower-income fathers, possibly decreasing average weeks worked among those with high past-due payments.⁸⁶ The best way to ensure more

consistent financial support for children with nonresident fathers is to increase employment and earnings among these fathers, set more reasonable child support orders in the first instance, and make it easier to reduce orders when unemployment, imprisonment, or other circumstances make it impossible for them to pay the amount they were ordered to pay when working.⁸⁷

We should also try to enroll more fathers in parenting programs. Parenting programs rarely reach fathers or expectant fathers, despite evidence that early father involvement is good for infants and children.⁸⁸ Father involvement during pregnancy substantially reduces infant mortality as a whole and racial gaps in infant mortality, as well as the precursors of infant mortality, including low birth weight and inadequate prenatal care.⁸⁹ Fathers who are involved with their children early in life tend to be involved later as well, and their young children tend to fare better.⁹⁰ Positive outcomes for young children, in turn, predict success later in life.⁹¹ Parenting programs, like many assistance programs, have too often focused on mothers while excluding fathers. This should change.

The welfare reforms of the 1990s aggressively pushed single mothers seeking cash welfare into employment and rewarded work with other forms of assistance, such as the EITC, SNAP, child care assistance, and health insurance. But these positive reforms left many fathers behind. We must do more to reconnect low-income fathers with the institutions of work and family. In addition, child support enforcement reforms should recognize that some men become fathers before completing school or acquiring much work experience. These fathers must be required to take responsibility for and support their children, but public policy should more effectively help them deliver on those expectations.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we've highlighted four important ways to tackle the problems associated with single parenthood: 1) promoting a new cultural norm surrounding parenthood and marriage; 2) providing young adults with education

about and access to the full range of effective contraceptive options; 3) increasing access to effective parenting education; and 4) helping to engage young, less-educated men in work and family through improvements to the EITC, child support enforcement, and fatherhood programs.

In the past, discussions of the family's role in poverty and opportunity have broken down between those on the right who say it's the biggest problem facing poor Americans, and those on the left who either minimize its importance

while emphasizing economic causes or say that there's nothing we can do about it. We break from that standoff. We recognize the central role that families play in children's development, and we believe that public policy can play an effective though limited role in promoting family formation. If we want more responsibility, greater opportunity, and enhanced economic security, our nation must help parents provide greater stability in their homes. If we don't, gains in the labor market and educational programs won't do enough to improve poor children's development.