

Why Marriage Matters for Children

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Does your marriage really matter to your children? Research says it does!

When society debates what children need to grow into healthy, happy, productive, well-adjusted adults, many things are listed as essentials: access to healthcare, nutrition, good schools, safe neighborhoods, love and plenty of encouragement. All of these are important to proper child-development, but the discussion often ignores the one factor that is prior to all these others: marital status of parents.

All things being equal, children with married parents consistently do better in every measure of well-being than their peers who have single, cohabiting, divorced or step-parents, and this is a stronger indicator than parental race, economic or educational status, or neighborhood. The literature on this is broad and strong.

Pitirim Sorokin, founder and first chair of the Sociology Department at Harvard, proclaimed the importance of married parents some fifty years ago.

The most essential sociocultural patterning of a newborn human organism is achieved by the family. It is the first and most efficient sculptor of human material, shaping the physical, behavioral, mental, moral and sociocultural characteristics of practically every individual. ...From remotest past, married parents have been the most effective teachers of their children.¹

The liberal Center for Law and Social Policy, a child advocacy organization, recently reported "Most researchers now agree that...studies support the notion that, on average, children do best when raised by their two married biological parents..."²

Child Trends also reports "An extensive body of research tells us that children do best when they grow up with both biological parents..."³

Educational Attainment

Sara McLanahan of Princeton University finds that "regardless of which survey we looked at, children from one-parent families are about twice as likely to drop out of school as children from two-parent families."⁴

Children from biological two-parent families have, on average, test scores and grade-point averages that are higher, they miss fewer school days, and have greater expectations of attending

college than children living with one parent. Additionally, of those from either type of family who do attend college, those from two-parent families are seven to 20 percent more likely to finish college.⁵

Children from divorced homes are 70 percent more likely than those living with biological parents to be expelled or suspended from school. Those living with never-married mothers are twice as likely to be expelled or suspended. Also, children who do not live with both biological parents are 45 to 95 percent more likely to require parent/teacher meetings to deal with performance or behavior problems than those who live with married parents.⁶

Idleness

Young men without married parents are 1.5 times more likely than those with married parents to be out of school and out of work. Young girls without married parents are twice as likely to be idle.⁷

Crime

In *A General Theory on Crime*, we learn, "Such family measures as the percentages of the population divorced, the percentages of households headed by women, and the percentage of unattached individuals in the community are among the most powerful predictors of crime rates."⁸

The Progressive Policy Institute, the research arm of the Democratic Leadership Council, reports that the "relationship between crime and one-parent families" is "so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low-income and crime. This conclusion shows up time and again in the literature."⁹

Premarital Sexual Activity and Illegitimate Childbearing

A major study published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* found that boys and girls who lived with both biological parents had the lowest risk of becoming sexually active. Teens living with only one biological parent, including those in stepfamilies, were particularly at risk for becoming sexually active at younger ages.¹⁰

Sara McLanahan found that white and black girls growing up in single-parent homes are 111 percent more likely to bear children as teenagers,

164 percent more likely to have a child out of marriage, and – if they do marry – their marriages are 92 percent more likely to dissolve compared to their counterparts with married parents.¹¹

Poverty

Historically, poverty has been a result of unemployment and low wages. Today, it is primarily a result of family structure. David Ellwood, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, notes:

The vast majority of children who are raised entirely in a two-parent home will never be poor during childhood. By contrast, the vast majority of children who spend time in a single-parent home will experience poverty.¹²

The Progressive Policy Institute declares, “It is no exaggeration to say that a stable, two-parent family is an American child’s best protection against poverty.”¹³ In fact, Former Clinton domestic policy advisor Bill Galston explains that avoiding family poverty requires three things: 1) finish high-school, 2) marry before having children and 3) marry after the age of 20. Only 8 percent of families who do this are poor, while 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor.¹⁴ Children from married homes are more likely to do all of these things, and therefore not likely to raise children who are also in poverty. Marriage breaks the vicious poverty cycle that traps children.

Physical Health and Mental Well-Being

Two leading scholars on the impact of family configuration upon child health find that single mothers report poorer overall physical health for their children than do mothers in intact marriages, regardless of racial or ethnic status.¹⁵

The National Center for Health Statistics found that children living with their biological parents received professional help for behavior and psychological problems at *half* the rate of children not living with both biological parents.¹⁶ Other studies show the general health problems of children from broken homes is increased by 20 to 30 percent, even when adjusting for demographic variables.¹⁷

Dr. Judith Wallerstein, a leading authority on the long-term effects of divorce on children, found that serious emotional and relational problems follow children of divorce throughout adolescence into adulthood. In fact, in some important measures, the negative affects of parental divorce grow worse as the child enters adulthood.¹⁸ Dr. Nicholas Zill, writing in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, agrees, finding that children of

divorce showed “high levels of emotional distress, or problem behavior, [and were more likely] to have received psychological help.”¹⁹ Many same-sex homes are created as a result of a homosexual parent leaving an existing marriage via divorce. Destroying a marriage to start another one may be desirable for a parent, but it hurts children deeply.

Substance Abuse

Regardless of gender, age, family income, race or ethnicity, adolescents not living with a biological mother or father are 50 to 150% more likely to abuse and be dependent on substances and need illicit drug-abuse treatment compared to their peers living with both biological parents.²⁰

The same study reported that females in “mother-only” families are 1.9 times more likely to use alcohol as girls living with both mother and father. Males in “mother-only” families are 1.5 times more likely to use alcohol than teen males living in mother/father families.

Physical and Sexual Abuse

The journal *Pediatrics* reported in 2002 that, “Children residing in households with adults unrelated to them were 8 times more likely to die of maltreatment than children in households with 2 biological parents. Risk of maltreatment death was elevated for children residing with step, foster, or adoptive parents.”²¹ It is critical to note that it is impossible for a child living in a same-sex parented family to live with both biological parents. It should deeply concern us that that child will be living in one of these family forms that increases risk of death by maltreatment.

Research published in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect* found that a girl is seven times more likely to be molested by a stepfather than a biological father. The study goes on to report that when biological fathers did molest their young daughters, a mother was not residing in the home who could protect the child. What is more, the nature of sexual abuse by stepfathers was more severe than by biological fathers.²² Every little boy in a male same-sex home will be living with at least one non-biological father as well as with a biological father without a protective mother present. The research says this child will be in much greater danger than a boy or girl living with a married mother and father.

Another study published in the same journal reports that children living with a single biological parent is nearly twice as likely to be sexually abused compared with a child living with a married mother and father.²³

Marriage is a rich personal resource for children and their parents. It protects them from poverty and sexual and physical abuse. It improves their physical and mental health. It helps them do better in every measure of educational development and ultimately go to college. It helps them stay away from violent, criminal and sexual behaviors. Marriage protects kids from substance abuse. This means teachers are not burdened with children who cause problems or have difficulty learning. Marriage protects our welfare systems by reducing the number of young adults who have dropped out of school and not working or who are having children in their teen years. Police being bothered by kids with married parents is rare. Marriage produces healthier children who do not stress our nation's medical system and insurance costs.

If we are to concern ourselves with the welfare of children, we have to be concerned with the health of marriage in our culture. For, as marriage goes, so go our children – and with them – the future of humanity.

¹ Pitirim Sorokin, *Society, Culture, and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), pp. 246-247; *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956), p. 5.

² Mary Parke, "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?" Center for Law and Social Policy Policy Brief, May 2003, p. 1.

³ Kristin Anderson Moore, et al., "Marriage From a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do about It?" Child Trends Research Brief, June 2002, p. 1.

⁴ Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 19.

⁵ McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994, p. 47.

⁶ Deborah Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 573-584.

⁷ McLanahan and Sandefur, p. 50.

⁸ Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 103.

⁹ Elaine Kamarck and William Galston, "Putting Children First: A Progressive Family Policy for the 1990s," whitepaper from the Progressive Policy Institute (September 27, 1990), pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Dawn Upchurch, et al., "Neighborhood and

Family Contexts of Adolescent Sexual Activity," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61 (1999): 920-930.

¹¹ Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1986), pp. 30-31.

¹² David Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 46.

¹³ Kamarck and Galston, 1990, p. 12.

¹⁴ As explained by James Q. Wilson, "Why We Don't Marry," *City Journal*,

<http://www.city-journal.org/html/12_1_why_we.html>.

¹⁵ Ronald J. Angel and Jacqueline Worobey, "Single Motherhood and Children's Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 29 (1988): 38-52.

¹⁶ Deborah A. Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-being: Data from the National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53 (1991): 573-584.

¹⁷ L. Remez, "Children Who Don't Live with Both Parents Face Behavioral Problems," *Family Planning Perspectives*, January/February 1992.

¹⁸ Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men and Woman a Decade After Divorce*, (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990); Judith Wallerstein, et al., *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, (New York: Hyperion, 2000), p. xxvii-xxix.

¹⁹ Nicholas Zill, Donna Morrison, and Mary Jo Coiro, "Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce on Parent-Child Relationships, Adjustment, and Achievement in Young Adulthood," *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7 (1993):91-103.

²⁰ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *The Relationship Between Family Structure and Adolescent Substance Use*, Rockville, MD: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, 1996.

²¹ Michael Stiffman, et al., "Household Composition and Risk of Fatal Child Maltreatment," *Pediatrics*, 109 (2002), 615-621.

²² Michael Gordon, "The Family Environment of Sexual Abuse: A Comparison of Natal and Stepfather Abuse," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 13 (1985): 121-130.

²³ David Finkelhor, et al., "Sexually Abused Children in a National Survey of Parents: Methodological Issues," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 21 (1997): 1-9.