

Deterioration of Family Unit

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Introduction

Family structures as we commonly know consist of mother and father with their children living together under one roof. Some families include grandparents others have step siblings or step mothers or fathers making up their living environment. But the family trend in our times is mainly around deinstitutionalization of the marriage and moving more towards a blended family or single parent family. With environmental pressures such as more work, both providers working, less value from a culture on marriage and acceptance of homosexual relationships, the ‘normal family’, seems to not be so normal. With the high rate of divorce more and more people are moving towards not getting married, some even choosing to become parents through artificial means. There are also government programs that support single mothers by providing them with childcare, food and shelter which entices them to not get married purely for the benefit of receiving government support. The trend is more towards a non traditional family, but what does that mean for our children. How does this lifestyle impact the future of our nations? This paper will attempt to look at some of the changes in the family unit, what effects these changes have and how can we correct the negative aspects of these changes.

The well being of our children is and should be the most important factor for all societies to exist and grow. Among all the factors impacting children, domestic trends take first priority mainly because it is the primary unit of mankind. Families in our society exist in many variations, single mothers, divorced parents, married couples, gay couples, grandparents as parents, divorced remarried parents. The various combinations of families are the most we have seen ever and most researchers claim that the major danger to our nation's future is children being raised by single parent especially those that never married. Various studies have shown the effect of divorce influencing a child's academic, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social confidence, and parent relationship. Commonly, studies have shown that children from divorced families show lower level of achievement in all of the areas of development. A study done by Paul & Bruce (1991) looked at these commonly held views attempting to further understand how large the differences are between children in divorced and intact families, if these differences are statistically significant and if there are larger differences for some outcomes than others. There study was a Meta analysis of various research articles from psychological, sociological and social science areas. The selected articles were mainly those that included children living in single parent families created via divorce or separation or death, and intact families, Overall, the articles totaled 13, 000 children in ninety two studies. The children were evaluated on various categories, "(a) academic achievement (standardized achievement tests, grades, teachers' ratings, or intelligence); (b) conduct (misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency); (c) psychological adjustment (depression, anxiety, or happiness); (d) self-concept (self-esteem, perceived competence, or internal locus of control); (e) social adjustment (popularity, loneliness, or

cooperativeness); (f) mother-child relations (affection, help, or quality of interaction); (g) father-child relations; and (h) other. The findings from the meta analysis of previous research lead to the same outcome that children of divorced parents experience lower level of well-being than children living with their intact families. In understanding why there are differences between children from various family types, three theories were identified; parent absence theory, economic disadvantage and family conflict theory. First the parental absence perspective that states the differences in developed is due to the lack of having a role model, source of emotional support and practical help. In order to better support this theory, studies comparing development of children between intact families, divorced families and single parent families due to death were analyzed. The findings reveal lower level of well being in children who have lost a parent to death compared to intact families; however children of divorced parents had the lowest level of well being. These findings indicated that divorced families provide the lowest level of well being in children. The economic theory states that the lower level of well being in non-intact families is because of lower economic standards. Comparison of children living with biological vs. step-parents as well as controlled economic variables provided little support for the economic theory. Children from intact homes showed higher well being than those of divorced step parent families suggesting that other factors are at play other than economics. It was found, however that Children exhibit more problems in step family environment than children living with biological parents which implies that replacing a parent with another to compensate income does not necessarily solve the problem in fact there is evidence that children in single parent families are better off than children in step parent families. Finally, conflict between divorced and intact parents was

determined to be a cause of lower well being was supported. Children in intact families with high conflict showed lower well being than divorced parents. Divorced parents in conflict with their ex partners also revealed lower well being for children. Overall, the findings from this study show the influence of a non-traditional family has on children. When families are together in harmony, children thrive in all aspects, but bring in death of a parent, conflict, separation and divorce, and the child begins to experience the instability in his life. Most parents feel that they can overcome the changes in their family structures, but what is critical to understand is that children do not have the same ability as an adult. Children need the support of both parents to feel the highest level of well being (Paul & Bruce 1991).

As we learn more and more about how family life influences the children living in it, it became evident that children need both parents to provide a stable, loving home where a child can receive proper care and guidance they need. We adults have become insensitive to things like divorce or single mothers or separated couples but what we must remember is that children entering this world are not used to such a setup. Factors leading to the success of children include families that consist of two biological parents that engage in regular activities with their children, provide ample opportunity to spend time together and with relative, grandparents and other supportive friends and family. “This builds a vibrant family subculture that provides a rich legacy of meaning for children throughout their lives.” One of the main ingredients of a good family is quality family time. With a direct correlation between amount of time parents spend with their child and the character of the child as an adult has been profound. What can we as a society do to remedy this situation? Since quality time is the main ingredient, the first step would be

to find ways to be able to give children the time they deserve. This would transform into working in part time work, or work in environments that do not take away too much of out attention. Other factors include, less TV watching, living in cheaper areas which would put less pressure on parents to make ends meet, and possibly holding off having children until you can afford to have them. But the well being of children is also dependent on the stability of the family, having both parents is known to be vital for children. Society must place value in marriage again, making the sacred bond of marriage mean more than it does today. Our culture and morals must be awakened to reestablish the meaning of marriage mostly 'for better or worse'. We as a nation must first realize that marriage is what holds men to the mother-child bond. Separation and divorce moves the father away from his children. In order to bring men back into childrearing, marriage must be revitalized. We must find ways to build stronger marriages so that divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing is reduced. Our beliefs in the Church and God have to be reestablished in our schools and homes to bring back the meaning of marriage. Another area of change is changing our work life. We have to find ways of working less when children are younger and work more later, or work in settings where the flexibility in the work environment makes it possible to spend time at home. Finally, instilling morals in children allow them to have empathy for others, follow the path of the Lord to guide them in difficult times as well as provide children with a place of release. "Successful childrearing requires the active and continuing physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual presence of parents in the lives of their children. Those parents who spend the most time in childrearing, other things equal, will have the best child outcomes."(Popenoe, 1998).

Knowing what is needed to raise a health family is easier said than done. Finding time to be with children, living with both parents around is even harder. Family structures are changing rapidly in the US with 65% married in 1980 to only 59% in 1999. With divorce rates high, families with single parents are becoming more and more the norm. Why are people moving away from marriage and what factors are causing such movements is analyzed in a study by Wells & Zinn (2004). They attempted to get a better understanding on why the emphasis on marriage is fading, possible benefits of staying married are also discussed. Marriage is the union between a man and woman. Marriage has been linked to higher standards of living; the median income for married family was \$57,000 in 1999 where as only \$38, 000 for single parent homes. If marriage is linked to better living standards, with the rise of single parent families, the living conditions of children in such homes raises concerns. Research in the area of marriage and race shows that white women tend to gain more from marriage mainly because the white men they marry tend to have high earning potential than women of color and their partners. But white women with high earning potential also are more prone to divorce and non-marital childbearing because they can support themselves, some even forgoing marriage due to economic independence. “Thus White women's privileged racial location contributes to more non marriage and increasing female headship in this population” (Wells & Zinn, 2004). To better understand the relationship between economic advantage and income independence, the study looked at a sample of families over a period of time researching their class, family type and economic status in a rural setting. The families were either single parent mother or father, married couples and

married couples with extended families. Findings from the study show that marriage was not the means to finding a stable job and enjoying economic freedom, rather it increased debt more than common assets. The most prevalent finding was that social class impacted whether one enjoyed the benefits of marriage with rural families not receiving these benefits. The findings reveal that marriage in rural settings did not bring a stable homes, stable resources or better housing or health benefits for people in low economic conditions. Therefore, marriage was not a remedy for economic stability; these findings provide insight for policy makers on how to enhance opportunity structures so that individuals in disadvantaged social locations can achieve the family stability and economic well being needed for all families. That would be one way enticing people to get married. If conditions remain as they stand today, then we can expect to see more and more single mothers living in poverty depended on welfare because they see no benefit to marriage (Wells & Zinn, 2004).

Conclusion

Family is the basic building block of a society. Children are born into a family from which they learn their morals, their self worth, as well as develop trust and love for others. When the building block itself is not stable then the outcome for children living in such a setting can be detrimental. In understanding the impact of families where there is only one parent, or step families it is obvious that children experience lower level of well being. But parents do not setup the stage to raise kids in a bad environment, they too have pressures externally like economic, social, emotional that influences their decisions to be married or not. Mothers who receive welfare know that if they marry the government will stop supporting them, then why must they marry? Many single mothers

stay single while living with partner so that they continue to receive government funding. Work life too is a large factor in the well being of children. There is immense pressure on people to outperform in the high fast competitive market. Such conditions take time away from children, but again very difficult for any individual to overcome.

So the answer lies somewhere in between about how to raise kids in such a society. First, changing government policies on welfare to encourage marriage must be created such as large tax benefits and educational scholarships for lower income students. Also, bringing back the family values of taking care of elders as in the olden days should be beneficial to the whole family. Elders have experience and love their grandchildren. Having extended family in the same home provides for more attention given to children from adults, provides parents with more time to themselves, and teaches children the value of caring for the elderly. In most countries like India parents live with grandparents and it is the responsibility of every child to take care of their parent in old age. This value of family life benefits all ages in a family. Finally, the re-establishment of religion and God in the family will bring happiness, spirituality in adults and time to reflect on each other as husband and wife so that problems in life can be settled rather than running to get divorced. More research however needs to be done in determining why we as a society are moving away from spirituality and more towards instant gratification. By understanding different cultures and researching what makes some families succeed in staying together and what makes others fail. The answer lies somewhere in between.

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