

Supporting Healthy Marriage and Good Parenting

“The human family is the most powerful, the most humane, and by far the most economical system known for making and keeping human beings human.”

Urie Bronfenbrenner, 2000

(Commencement address at Penn State U.)

The Data

- **Declining proportion of married family households.** In 1970 40% of US households were comprised of married adults with children, compared to 23% in 2003. Between 1970 and 2003, single mother households increased from 3 million to 10 million, and single father households from 500,000 to 2 million. (www.census.gov)
- **Demographic trends affecting household composition.** The shift from two-parent to one-parent families is affected by an increase in unmarried births –itself influenced by increasingly later age at first marriage – and growth in divorce by married couples with children. (www.census.gov, above)
- **Children’s living arrangements.** The majority of white (69%) and Hispanic (55%) children live with their married parents, while the majority of black children (53%) live with a single parent. One in four Hispanic children and one in five white children live in single parent households. (L. Wherry & K. Finegold, *Marriage Promotion and the Living Arrangements of Black, Hispanic, and White Children*, Urban Institute, 2004)

The Issues

- **Disconnect between marriage and parenting status.** More than half of unmarried new parents with low incomes are romantically involved and intend to get married. (National Conference of State Legislatures, www.ncsl.org/statedef/welfare/quickfacts.htm) Yet, for all teens who become pregnant, marriage today is much rarer before childbirth than it was 50 years ago. (*Teen Pregnancy: Trends and Lessons Learned*, Alan Guttmacher Institute, www.agi-usa.org)
- **Child poverty and family composition.** Children living with married parents (biological, adoptive, or stepparents) experience a poverty rate of 8%, compared to 38% poverty for children living with single parents and 16% poverty for children living with cohabiting parents. Even still, estimates are that if all unmarried mothers married similar mates, the child poverty rate would drop only 4%. (P. Roberts, *I Can’t Give You Anything But Love*, CLASP Policy Brief, 2004)
- **Why married couples with children can be more economically successful.** They can share costs and perhaps then free up money for asset accumulation; they have the potential for increased income; they can share child care or its costs, and they have a larger familial network from which they can get assistance. (P. Roberts, above)
- **Parental involvement and child well-being.** Children do better with the involvement of their two parents, even if they are not married. Children with involved fathers are less likely to become teen parents, be involved with the juvenile justice system, and perform poorly in school. (National Conference of State Legislatures, above) At least half of the nation’s poor children, mostly in single mother households, have regular interaction with their fathers. (*Poor Children See Their Dads More Often Than Commonly Assumed*, Urban Institute, 2003)
- **The challenges of paying child support.** About half of all fathers who owe child support pay it. Of those who don’t, half lack the resources to pay support. These fathers have low wage employment or may be unemployed, have limited work histories, and have low literacy levels. Many fathers who aren’t paying formal child support – which the state keeps to offset any welfare the mother may collect – still provide direct support to the mothers and their children. (National Conference of State Legislatures, above)

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Options for Philanthropy

- **Supporting Innovative solutions to reduce adolescent sexual risk-taking and teen pregnancy.** Amidst debate about values, one thing everyone agrees about is the importance of getting results: reducing the level of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. One such innovation that's produced positive results is Plain Talk, a neighborhood-based strategy to equip adults with the skills and tools to communicate effectively to teens about reducing sexual risk-taking. (www.aecf.org/initiatives/plaintalk/)
- **Investing in strategically timed and strategically focused marriage and fatherhood programs.** Research indicates that fatherhood programs for unwed dads have a significant window of opportunity for success at the moment the baby is born (*Dispelling Myths about Unmarried Fathers*, Fragile Families Research Brief #1, 2000, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/files/briefs/researchbrief1.pdf>). Forthcoming research will give us a better idea of what kinds of investments work for what populations to promote healthy marriage (www.supportinghealthymarriage.org).
- **Building capacity for existing organizations to stay the course.** Most local fatherhood programs, for example, have a track record of about ten years or less. They thus face the need to build capacity for sustainability through fundraising, strengthened infrastructures, results measurement, and effective message communication. Support for capacity building in specific programs guarantees that successes are less likely to be eroded. The National Fatherhood Initiative (www.fatherhood.org) and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (www.npnff.org) are useful resources in this field.
- **Convening key stakeholders to promote collaboration.** While the emerging healthy marriages movement has a lot in common with the more longstanding responsible fatherhood movement, the potential exists for competition around issue-framing and resources. The opportunity to bring these stakeholders to a common table — along with organizations focused on assisting single mothers — can advance the possibility that the needs of all children, regardless of their family structure, will receive attention.

Key Resources

- **Center for Law and Social Policy.** Provides research-based fact sheets, policy briefs, and legislative analyses on issues of marriage promotion, child support, pregnancy prevention, and child care, to name a few. (www.clasp.org)
- **Supporting Healthy Marriage.** Details the latest evaluations of policies and programs aimed at helping couples strengthen and maintain healthy marriages. (www.supportinghealthymarriage.org)
- **National Center on Fathers and Families.** Develops materials that expand the knowledge base, strengthen practice, and contribute to critical policy discussions around father involvement, family development, and child well-being. (www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu)
- **National Council on Family Relations.** As the largest organization of marriage and family researchers and practitioners, provides research-based information and analyses on issues of marriage, family, and child well-being.



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