

## On Air With Elizabeth Marquardt



Elizabeth is vice president for Family Studies and Director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values. She is also the editor of IAV's blog, FamilyScholars.org. Her 2005 best-selling book, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, is based on the first nationally representative study of grown children of divorce in the United States. Elizabeth has appeared often on NBC's Today Show as well as on broadcast news programs on CNN, ABC, FOX, CBS, and PBS and scores of radio programs including BBC World News and national and local NPR stations. Her writings have been published in the *New York Times*,

*Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Slate*, *Huffington Post*, and elsewhere. She is a frequent presenter to academic and professional groups in the U.S. and internationally.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with Elizabeth conducted by Bill Brooks, president of the North Carolina Family Policy Council (NCFPC). An edited version of this interview aired in two parts in September 2011 on the NCFPC's weekly radio program, "Family Policy Matters." Elizabeth discussed the major findings from the long-awaited third edition of the IAV report, *Why Marriage Matters: 30 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, which was co-sponsored by the Center for Marriage and Families, and the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. This interview can be heard at [www.ncfamily.org/radioshowarchives2011.html](http://www.ncfamily.org/radioshowarchives2011.html) or on iTunes® Podcast – Family Policy Matters.

**Bill Brooks:** The report's major finding is that cohabitation has replaced divorce as the "main contributor to the rising rates of family instability in the United States." How much has cohabitation increased over the past four decades in the U.S., and how does that compare to the rate of divorce?

**Elizabeth Marquardt:** You know, I think we have all become accustomed to the sad reality that divorce rates are high and have really changed the experiences of many children and families in America over the last three or four decades. We have seen, though, that the divorce rates have stabilized. Now if you're getting married today, you're less likely to be getting divorced than you were in the last couple of decades, and that is largely good news for children. But what has happened is that one of the reasons that the divorce rates have stabilized is that fewer people are getting married in the first place. As a lot of people probably know, in the United States today, the percentage of children born outside of marriage is now over 40 percent—more than four in 10 children in America are born

outside of marriage, so their parents are not getting married in the first place, but they are not getting divorced. One of the things we are learning is that cohabitation is not as stable as marriage.

**BB:** When many people hear that divorce is down, they assume this is a good thing, and of course, any decrease in parental divorce is a positive thing for children and society. But the report notes that the increase in cohabitation is bad for children.

**Why—what are some ways that cohabitation harms children?**

**EM:** The thing about cohabitation is that it isn't an institution. Marriage is an institution—it brings together the laws of a society and the norms and expectations of your family, your community, your church (if you are a part of a church) to tell a couple what is marriage, [and] what are you supposed to do when you're married. And while divorce, I believe, is tragic but sometimes necessary, there are some expectations around that too. There are some laws and norms around that. Cohabitation or living together, as most people call it, is much more fuzzy—it's hard to know when it starts, and it's hard to know what people should do. What is a live-in boyfriend supposed to do? Is he supposed to be a father to the children in the home, or is he just passing through? It's much more unstable. And, in fact, what we find is the cohabitation break up rate, or the likelihood that parents who are just living together but not married will break up is 170 percent higher than it is for married couples! So if you're a child born today, by the time you're age 12, if your parents are married versus cohabitating, those cohabitating parents are 170 percent more likely to split up by the time you're 12 than your married parents. So while marriage unfortunately is not as stable as it used to be, living together is far more unstable. And what this means is that children are exposed to more change throughout their childhood with people passing through, and in unstable home situations. One of the consequences of this is unfortunately and tragically federal data shows that children are much more likely to be abused in cohabitating situations—to be physically, sexually, or emotionally abused. . . . One of the other pieces of data that really illustrates the changing family situation for children today is by age 12, about 24 percent of children will be children of divorce, but by age 12 about 42 percent of children will have experienced cohabitation in their lives in some way. So cohabitation—or parents living together and having these live-in relationships that are short-term and break up, and perhaps new relationships again in their mothers lives and father

lives—this is increasingly the experience for more children in America today, rather than marriage and divorce. And it's just more unstable, more dangerous, and it really is not a good start in life for America's children.

**BB:** Many young people today mistakenly believe that cohabitation is similar to marriage. But the report concludes that cohabitation is “not the functional equivalent to marriage.” How does cohabitation differ from marriage, particularly for children?

**EM:** When you get married to someone, you make a promise, and in some ways that is what marriage is—it's a public promise backed up by law. But it's not just a legal thing that you make in front of your family, your pastor, in front of your friends—you make a promise to stick with this other person in good times or bad. And there are some expectations about how you should behave, what you should do for your husband or for your wife if they get sick, or if you hit financial hard times, or when children come along. None of that exists when you are just living together—you don't make a public promise, you're not really accountable to your partner's family. You probably haven't stopped by a church to get some support there. If children come along, people tend to have very high hopes and a lot of joy around the time of a birth of a child, but as we know raising a child can be hard and it can be stressful, and when you hit those hard times, you don't have this public promise to someone, you don't have as much social support from their family or from the community, so it's a much more fragile institution. . . .

**BB:** Elizabeth, cohabitation is not the only topic addressed in this report. As I mentioned, it includes 30 conclusions about why marriage matters to individuals and society. We obviously can't talk about all 30, but I want to focus on a few. The report's most important conclusion is that “The intact biological married family remains the gold standard for family life in the United States.” Why is this—what is it about the intact, biological married family that distinguishes it from all other family forms?

**EM:** What you have when you have married biological parents raising their children together, [is] something really unique. And now I do want to say something right here: whenever we talk about biology, that raises the question of adoption, and I want to say adoption is a wonderful, pro-child institution that is a complement to the institution of marriage. . . . And so this is not at all criticizing adoption. That said, what you have in an intact, biological, married-parent family is . . . the best set . . . of circumstances in which a child can thrive because everyone in the family shares similar goals. You know, my child is also my husband's child,

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[and] my child's mother and my child's father live in the same home and strive to get along with one another. We have this thing called marriage, where we have made this public promise, and we have people in the community and in our families who back us up. We may be involved in a church that backs up, [and] the law gives us certain protections as well. . . . So you have a little unit of people who are all connected to one another in multiple ways through their bodies, through their similarities, in how they look, and their history and their family history, and the law backing that up, and there are names for everything. People know where they belong, and how they are related to one another, and let's face it, family life—even in that kind of setting—is hard enough. My husband and I are raising our kids in the intact biological family, and it's chaos a lot of times, and yet this is the best thing we have figured out as human beings, so far, to raise children in as stable a situation as possible, and help them to thrive and help society to move forward. So it doesn't mean other family structures are automatically damaging to children, or that you can't survive them or something. I grew up, for instance, in North Carolina, in a family with a lot of divorce, and I turned out okay, but it was a hard road, and that was one of the reasons I got interested in this work. So, it's not that you can't make it, but there are more challenges for a child coming along when their mom and dad are not on the scene trying their best . . . in this thing called marriage.

**BB:** How important is this conclusion—that the intact biological married family is the gold standard for family life—to the ongoing debate in our nation over the definition of marriage and family?

**EM:** The reason why the debate about defining marriage and the question of same sex marriage is important, I think, is when we redefine marriage and say it's about two people, instead of about a

*man and a woman*, what it does is it makes it harder for us to say as a society that children need their mother and father. You know, if we've redefined marriage to say it's just two parents that matter but not necessarily a mom and dad ... (and that's why children of gay and lesbian persons are different for one thing), it makes it harder for us to say that other children need their mom and dad because they're like, "well if we believe that some kids do fine with their two moms and don't miss their dad, then why do we ... believe that those folks should get married, especially if a baby is coming along, why do we think its important to have a mom and dad on the scene when we have accepted that some families do fine with two moms and two dads?" So the challenge I see in redefining marriage, and of course this is a debate happening all across America and I know it's happening in North Carolina right now, is that it makes it harder for

us to affirm the importance to most children of having their mom and dad. And I think that if we are unable to affirm that, we are going to see even more weakening in families more broadly.... So, in a strange way redefining marriage to try to let in gay and lesbian persons into the marriage system, I fear, could weaken marriage for other people...and [it's] something to be very cautious about.

**BB:** Elizabeth, what do you hope lawmakers and family scholars and even parents will take away from the conclusions in the [Why Marriage Matters](#) report?

**EM:** One of the things I think is so foundational about marriage is that it's not that marriage is pretty every day. I mean, some people have wonderful marriages. But for a lot of people marriage is often hard. But by making that promise and keeping that promise, you are teaching your kids something really important about loyalty, about sticking with things when times get rough, about doing the right thing even when the right thing isn't always fun that day, and that is a really important lesson for children to learn. Certainly, if there is abuse in marriage, if there are addiction issues, if there is serial infidelity, people definitely need to get help, and divorce might be the best solution in that case. But most marriages that end in divorce don't look that different from most marriages that stay together. We all have the same kind of stresses for the most part in our marriages, and by continuing to just put one foot in front of the other, [and] by keeping your good-enough marriage together, you're doing something good for your children. You're teaching them about loyalty and stability and keeping promises—you're keeping one home for your children where they don't have to go put on a backpack and pull a suitcase to go see their mom or go see their dad. And you're doing something good for your children even on those days when it feels like it's hard, and you're wondering if you are doing the right thing. So my encouragement to parents who are listening to this, or to people who are thinking about starting a family, is that marriage really does matter. It's an important gift to give to your children, and there are a lot of good resources out there now to get help if you are having a hard time in your marriage, and the most important thing I think is ... unless there are extreme circumstances in which someone is getting hurt, which I think might warrant divorce, the important thing is to get help and have faith in your marriage, stick with your kids, and stick with your spouse. And I can almost guarantee you that life will work out better in the long run if you can find the help, and manage to do that. ❖

## Radio Stations Airing Family Policy Matters

<b>Belmont/Gastonia</b>	WCGC1270 AM	Sunday, 11:30 AM Sunday, 11:45 PM
<b>Charlotte</b>	WHVN 1240 AM	Sunday, 11:30 AM Sunday, 11:45 PM
	WOGF 1450 AM	Saturday, 3:45 PM
<b>Charlotte/ Harrisburg</b>	WOGF 88.3 FM	Saturday, 3:45 PM
<b>Fayetteville</b>	WCLN 107.3 FM	Saturday, 7:00 AM
<b>Forest City</b>	WWOL 780 AM	Wednesday, 8:45 AM
<b>Gastonia</b>	WGAS 1420 AM	Saturday, 3:45 PM
<b>Greensboro</b>	WKEW 1400 AM	Sunday, 9:30 AM
<b>Greensboro/ Winston-Salem</b>	WTRU 830 AM	Saturday, 6:00 AM
<b>Greenville</b>	WLQC 103.1 FM	Sunday, 11:06 PM
<b>Newbern</b>	WSTK 104.5 FM	Saturday 3:15 PM
<b>Newland</b>	WECR 1130 AM	Saturday, 9:06 AM
<b>Raleigh</b>	WTRU 1030 AM	Saturday, 6:00 AM Sunday, 9:30 AM
<b>Raleigh/Durham</b>	WDRU1030 AM	Saturday, 6:00 AM
<b>Salisbury</b>	WOGF 93.3 FM	Saturday, 3:45 PM
<b>Sanford</b>	WLHC 103.1 FM	Sunday, 11:06 PM
<b>Shalotte</b>	WVCB 1410 AM	Wednesday, 10:05 AM Saturday, 4:30 PM
<b>Troy</b>	WJRM 1390 AM	
<b>Wilmington</b>	WMYT 1180 AM	Sunday, 1:00 PM
<b>Winston-Salem</b>	WBFB 1550 AM	Saturday, 5:00 PM
	WPOL 1340 AM	Sunday, 9:30 AM
	WPIP 880 AM	Sunday, 5:00 PM