

Findings



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Why Families Matter

The Need for Husbands and Wives—Fathers and Mothers

By Christina Sim



Strong families are a good thing. For centuries, the model of marriage embodied in law and culture has reflected the understanding that society needs strong families.

More recently, countless studies have reinforced this understanding, showing that men, women and children benefit from the family structure of marriage. Given the current attacks on traditional family values, it is now more important than ever to understand why the family works and how it benefits all of society.

The U.S. Congress declared in 1996 that “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society.”¹ These official governmental findings underline what most citizens already know to be true: that marriage is an intrinsic good, and a fundamental building block for society. How exactly does the institution of marriage provide this foundation? Does the gender of the participants in a marriage really matter? Why should society, or the state, care about the makeup of the family? This paper surveys the evidence and seeks an answer to these crucial questions.

Husband-Wife Complementarity

The now-famous catchphrase, “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus,”² has struck a chord with many Americans. Deep down, most of us recognize that there are genuine fundamental differences between men and women. As Focus on the Family experts Glenn Stanton and Bill Maier wrote, “The strong benefit of marriage is that males and females are designed with profound differences, and these differences are coordinated in marriage so that each contributes what the other lacks.”³ The simple truth is that men and women are wired differently, with

different strengths and weaknesses. This complementarity is a necessary component of marriage.

These gender differences begin in the womb. Nurture and environment, while influential in the creation of behavioral patterns, simply reinforce the biological differences between the sexes. When a baby develops male gonads in utero, these organs secrete testosterone and other androgenic hormones, which in turn act on the brain.⁴ Once the brain has been so masculinized, no amount of socialization

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can change these tendencies.⁵ The impact of this in utero gendering plays itself out in the lives and behaviors of adult men and women.⁶ The presence of testosterone, which influences aggressive behavior⁷ and controls sexual desire,⁸ also plays a vital role in behavioral differences between the sexes.

Women also bring many unique gifts and characteristics to a marriage, one of the most important of which is the female nurturing instinct. In families all over the world, it is mothers who overwhelmingly take on childcare, spending anywhere from 2.5 to 12 times more time with their children than do fathers.⁹ Such impulses are biological, not merely social. Societies that have attempted to offer incentives for nontraditional parenting roles, such as Sweden and the Israeli kibbutzim, never succeed in suppressing the gender differ-

ential in childcare.¹⁰ Females have stronger empathy impulses even from a very young age, as shown in studies of children as young as one day old.¹¹ Researchers have also discovered that the hormone oxytocin, which promotes bonding and a calm, relaxed emotional state in both males and females, is released in large quantities in women during pregnancy and breastfeeding, resulting in a high rate of mother-infant bonding.¹²

The bottom line is that there are real differences between men and women, which causes them to bring unique perspectives into a marriage. Given this complementarity, “The marital ideal—one man and one woman bound in body and soul, sharing, comforting, communicating through good times and bad—is very appealing even, or perhaps particularly, in a cynical age.”¹³

General Benefits of Marriage

Broad and compelling evidence has shown that marriage is vitally important to adults as well as to children. Even after controlling for factors like socioeconomic status, education, and race, studies have shown that benefits abound for couples in marriage relationships.

Economic Benefits: On average, married couples build more wealth than similar singles or cohabiting couples.¹⁴ These benefits stem from more than just access to two incomes. Studies show that marriage partners build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior and wealth accumulation also appear to play a role.¹⁵ Marriage increases the earning power of men around 15 percent. One explanation of this increase lies in the fact that married men appear to have greater work commitment, lower quit rates, and healthier and

more stable personal routines.¹⁶

Health Benefits: Studies have found that marriage increases life expectancy, even after controlling for race, income and family background.¹⁷ In most developed nations, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men. Nonmarried women face risks about 1.5 times greater than those faced by married women.¹⁸ Married mothers are also half as likely to be victims of domestic violence.¹⁹ Married people generally are three times less likely than cohabiting couples to report that arguments escalated to physical violence.²⁰

Married couples enjoy better health on average—they appear to manage illness better, monitor each others' health, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.²¹ Several reasons could be given for this phenomenon. For one, married men tend to settle down, turning away from the “wild” behaviors of single men and thinking about providing for a wife and family.²² There is also the social support effect—wives generally monitor health and deal with healthcare providers on behalf of the family.²³ The emotional support of a spouse also seems to help people recover from illness better and to better manage chronic disease; there is evidence that it can actually boost the immune system, making married individuals less likely to catch even the common cold.²⁴ Spousal support also leads to better emotional health—the marriage relationship is unique in its ability to foster personal growth and develop true intimacy.²⁵

Benefits of Marriage to Children

Research clearly indicates that a child's wellbeing is dependent upon family structure and parental marital status. Although most children who are not raised by both biological parents are able to avoid serious problems, virtually all suffer at some level. Studies also indicate that even children in stepfamilies do not fare as well as children from intact families. The research shows that “it is not simply the presence of two parents, as some have assumed, but the presence of two biological parents that seems to support children's development.”²⁶

Economic Benefits: Children benefit from the increased likelihood of economic stability that comes with marriage. Across every race and ethnic group, children living in married households have the lowest poverty rates.²⁷ Studies have shown that when parents fail to marry and

stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty. The majority of children who grow up outside of intact families experience at least one year of dire poverty, with family incomes less than half the official poverty threshold.²⁸ Researchers at the Center for Law and Social Policy agree, finding that children raised by both biological parents are less likely to live in poverty or experience health problems, less likely to have behavioral or psychological problems, and more likely to graduate from high school.²⁹

Health Benefits: Children who live in intact families enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family configurations. Divorce and unmarried childbearing appear to have negative effects on children's physical health and life expectancy.³⁰ Parental divorce certainly increases the incidence of health problems in children.³¹ More striking are the long-term health disadvantages associated with divorce. In one study, parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by four years, even after controlling for childhood health status, family background, and personal characteristics like impulsiveness and emotional instability.³²

Children raised without both biological parents are more likely to be abused. Studies have shown that children living with their natural fathers without their mothers present were more likely to be abused, and that children were more likely to be abused by stepfathers than natural fathers.³³

Parental marriage is also associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality. On average, having an unmarried mother results in a 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality—with the greatest risk among white mothers over the age of 20.³⁴ Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong supports for single mothers.³⁵

Stronger Relationships with Parents: Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers will have good relationships with their children. In a study of young adults with divorced parents, 65 percent reported poor relationships with their fathers, compared to 25 percent of those from intact families.³⁶ In fact, divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and their children than remaining in an unhappy marriage does.³⁷ Children have stronger relationships with their mothers as well when the parents are married. For instance, infants

of married mothers were more likely to be securely attached than those of cohabiting or single mothers.³⁸ Strong relationships with both parents create many subsidiary benefits, as will be shown below.

Future Impact: Research shows that traumatic childhood experiences, including parental separation or divorce, all reliably predict illicit drug use from early adolescence into adulthood. Compared with peers from intact families, teens whose parents have divorced are 1.5 times more likely to use illicit drugs by age 14.³⁹ Growing up outside of an intact family also increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents. For instance, daughters raised outside of intact marriages are approximately three times more likely to end up young, unwed mothers.⁴⁰

Homosexual Parenting: The research on homosexual parenting is limited at this point. The sample size is fairly small, and all major studies on the subject have been called into question.⁴¹ The only fair conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that children raised by same-sex parents are analogous to those raised by heterosexual divorced parents.⁴² Such studies are not designed to shed light on family structure per se and, given the proven disadvantages of being raised by divorced parents, cannot credibly be used to contradict the current weight of social science. Such research shows that family structure matters, and that the family structure most protective of child wellbeing is the intact, married, biological family.

Father-Mother Complementarity

The main reason that marriage is the best context in which to raise children is that there are distinct things that mothers and fathers give to their children. Just as a husband and a wife are complementary in marriage, a father and a mother are complementary in childrearing.⁴³

What Fathers Contribute: The U.S. Census Bureau acknowledged the important role of the father in raising a child, declaring that “It is undisputed among researchers and policy pundits alike that fathers' involvement is extremely important for children's proper social and emotional development.”⁴⁴ One basic reason for this is the need for a father figure role model. For young boys especially, a loving biological father is necessary to prevent behavioral problems. Studies have shown that “fathers are meant to provide their sons with a working model of how to negotiate one's way through the social

order and manage family responsibilities,” and that even a “firm but loving mother” cannot eliminate increased behavioral problems in many young boys.⁴⁵ The presence of the father is also a significant protective factor in reducing sexual activity and pregnancy among adolescent girls.⁴⁶ It is specifically fathers who demonstrate the assertiveness that can teach children to express opinions, defend their rights, and avoid manipulation.⁴⁷ The research is clear: effective fathering increases the child’s chances of developing a positive body image, self-esteem, moral strength, and intellectual and social competence.⁴⁸

Involvement of the father plays a key role in child intellectual development. Fathers tend to focus on mathematical reasoning, spatial perception and mechanical aptitude.⁴⁹ Paternal absence negatively impacts the cognitive performance of children, particularly boys. A study of children of divorce showed that father-absent boys had greater learning deficits than boys with involved fathers. While differences were less noticeable at young ages, they began to emerge and increase over time.⁵⁰

Fathers are also vital to sexual identity formation. The mere presence of the father seems to impact the developing child through his masculinity and “different-from-mother” approach. Fathers also play a significant role specifically in the development of masculinity in adolescent teen boys, as fathers tend to be more concerned about the sexual identity of their children than mothers.⁵¹

What Mothers Contribute: While every woman is different, and not all mothers fit the traditional mold, social science statistics reveal many general truths about the needs that only mothers can fulfill. For example, mothers, as natural nurturers, are more likely to pay attention to a child’s physical and emotional needs. For the child, motherly love is more unconditional and comforting, and provides the “foundation of human attachment” that fosters an empathic character in children.⁵² Studies have shown that emotional support in the home, as measured by maternal acceptance and involvement and maternal emotional and verbal responsiveness, for children ages three to five, is a significant predictor of later hyperactivity development.⁵³

Mothers are also the primary moral educators of their children. This is partly because mothers simply spend more time getting to know their children. In one major study, regardless of the earning status of both parents and the fact that

they spent an equal amount of time with their children, mothers still reported taking more responsibility for helping their children with school work, disciplining their children, and participating in “fun” activities with them.⁵⁴ Mothers are also more knowledgeable about their adolescent children’s activities than fathers are, having more active supervision of their children than fathers do.⁵⁵

Mothers have a strong, positive influence on helping adolescents refrain from sexual activity. Mothers who clearly communicate disapproval of sexual activity and who have close relationships with their children are an important factor in adolescents delaying the initiation of sexual intercourse.⁵⁶ Mothers also play an important role in the development of sexual identity, alongside that of the father. As adolescents develop psychological and sexual independence, the mother’s femininity clarifies her son’s heterosexual interest and encourages her daughter in her path toward womanhood.⁵⁷

Children need both mothers and fathers. The differences between men and women, played out properly in marriage, become distinct and necessary components of childrearing. Strong families in general bestow many great benefits to children, but it is only marriage between a mother and a father that provides optimal parenting.

Benefits of Marriage to the State

American government has chosen to be involved in the question of marriage and families. From a positive standpoint, the government has long recognized that the family is the fundamental building block of society.⁵⁸ The institution of the nuclear family predates any governmental system, and is acknowledged as worthy of respect and protection. The government also recognizes that intact families are more likely to make good citizens. As previously discussed, marriage creates economically stable units able to contribute more in taxes, and also reduces the likelihood that the state will have to intervene through expensive crime control or social services programs.

The state is entangled in the problems caused by broken families. Welfare regulations, for example, recognize that strengthening the family would help reduce many of the root problems causing people to stay on welfare. The 1996 federal welfare act was based on the “well-documented” consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society.⁵⁹ Teen childbearing costs the

U.S. government nearly \$7 billion every year.⁶⁰ Nearly three-quarters of government means-tested welfare aid to children goes to single-parent families; over 80 percent of long-term child poverty occurs in broken or never-married families. On average, marriage would reduce the odds that a mother and a child will live in poverty by more than 70 percent.⁶¹ If more time and energy were spent on strengthening families, fewer children would end up living in poverty or stuck in the cycle of welfare.

Conclusion

Marriage has always been the key to society—“As a highly visible social and legal institution, marriage provides both the structure and the hope men and women need, so that such a resolution of male and female sexual interests is not only possible but attainable.”⁶² This complementary resolution of man and woman, husband and wife, and father and mother, serves many critical purposes in society. Children, adults, and society in general need a functioning model of marriage in order to survive.

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