



Someone has to think of the children



SAVING
RELATIONSHIPS

In the past few decades, marriages rates have fallen and divorce rates have risen. Today one-third of children are born out of wedlock, while a significant number lose all contact with one parent.

These trends have had many negative consequences for children.

Hundreds of studies report problematic outcomes for the health, education and wellbeing of the young people affected by the changes and where children experience more than one family transition, the risks compound.

This is not to say that all the effects apply to each child whose parents' divorce, or who is raised by a single parent.

There is no way to predict how any particular child will be affected. But it is clear that there are widespread ramifications for this cohort of children as a whole.

Nor is it to suggest that many single parents are not doing a good job, often in very difficult circumstances. But as renowned sociologist Prof Andrew Cherlin has noted, even if a minority of the affected children have their lives altered, it is still a lot of children.

Increasingly, the social scientists argue that we must do something about the issue.

One of the world's leading marital scholars, Prof Paul Amato, concludes his survey of the research that "studies consistently indicate that children raised by two happily and continuously married parents have the best chance of developing into competent and successful adults".

Prof Amato adds: "Because we all have an interest in the wellbeing of children, it is reasonable for social institutions (such as the state) to attempt to increase the proportion of children raised by married parents with satisfying and stable marriages."

The alternative is to treat the negative consequences as the unavoidable flotsam of modern relations.

This is a counsel of despair.

There are a number of practical

policy responses.

First, better education about relationships should start in schools.

Second, the British Labour MP, Frank Field, recently proposed in the UK that there should be more education about parenting for young people.

He had observed that an increasing number of youngsters do not have a workable model of positive family life.

Third, pre-marriage education should be expanded. Currently, about 30 per cent of couples participate in such programs, but those most in need often miss out.

Fourth, new parenthood is often a stressful time. There is a need to raise knowledge about parenting skills, something the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, has responded to with an education voucher for all new parents.

Fifth, many people enter new relationships when previous ones break down, which often involves the formation of step-families.

More assistance is required to prevent these relationships breaking down at an even higher rate than original marriages.

There is also a need for greater research into which programs provide the best assistance in preventing marital dysfunction and supporting the widespread aspiration that most people have for a happy and stable marriage.

Finally, many people later regret their divorce and wish that something more could have been done to save their marriage.

While maintaining the right to divorce, we could do more to allow couples who so wish to pursue a reconciliation of their marital differences.

Taken together these proposals could help address a trend that worries many social scientists and policy makers.

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