

# The Parenting Deficit

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# Foreword

The politics of the 1980s was dominated by the pursuit of greater individual freedom. Across the Western world individuals' rights to choose were treated as paramount, first by the political right and later by the left. Individual and consumer choice became one of the few absolute taboos in political discourse.

By the early 1990s many were beginning to fear that freedom might not be such an unambiguous good. Consumer-driven societies seemed to lack the capacity for long-term investment and sacrifice that might be necessary for economic success. Overindividualist societies seemed to lose out on personal responsibility and the everyday morals and mutual respect that make it possible to live in densely packed cities and nations. As societies seemed to fall apart many began to fear that the cult of choice was not only a symptom but also a cause of fragmentation.

The communitarian movement is the most developed response to this unease. Based in the USA, and drawing on a range of different traditions it has sought to put together not only a serious new approach to economic and social theory but also a set of political and social precepts. Its highest promise, and its most controversial claim, is that there is nothing inevitable about the fragmentation of communities and societies. Instead it argues that the tough minded application of certain principles – above all, the idea that all rights need to be balanced by responsibilities – can help societies cohere without going back to the days when an authoritarian morality was enforced by the state.

Amitai Etzioni is the undisputed intellectual leader of this movement, and has done more than anyone else to articulate a coherent alternative to the radical individualism of the 1980s. He makes a series of powerful arguments. First that societies cannot cohere without shared notions of right and wrong that are clearly signalled through laws and everyday practices: what Robert Bellah called the 'habits of the heart'. Second that modern Western societies have greatly overemphasised the importance of rights and underestimated the significance of responsibilities. Third, that too many of the forms of economic and social life in countries like the USA and UK have tended to foster selfishness and self-absorption rather than an awareness of the needs of others.

On this last point Etzioni is careful not to argue against individuality as such. Indeed, he argues that many other societies such as China, Russia or Japan probably need to move much further towards individualism and away from their traditions of conformity and constraint. It is just that in many Western societies – particularly North America but also much of Western Europe – there is now a chronic imbalance in the relations between individual and community, an imbalance which contributes to the widespread sense of social malaise and dislocation.

These arguments elicit a complex response. Some would claim that there are no longer any clearly definable communities which can lay claim to the kind of moral authority which the communitarians claim. Others distrust the conservatism implicit in much of the communitarian argument: their reevaluation of marriage and the family as the foundations of community, and their stress on enduring values. Some argue that despite the communitarians' careful avoidance of sexism there is nevertheless a subliminal implication that women should return home from the workplace.

Nor is there any shortage of political opposition. Many on the left have become ill-at-ease with moral arguments, with making judgments, and (surprisingly given their philosophical roots) with the use of words like 'antisocial'. Meanwhile radical individualists of the right naturally mistrust the reassertion of the significance of society and community, not just as figures of rhetoric but as the source of real obligations.

But few of these criticisms really get to the heart of the case made by Etzioni and others. As societies fragment – and the USA is arguably much further down this road than the UK – the pretence of much of our political discourse that there are no trade-offs between freedoms on the one hand, and costs and limits on the other, is losing its conviction. This has become particularly evident in relation to the environment, where the real trade offs between prosperity and sustainability are only partially obscured by the popularity of catch-phrases like ‘sustainable development’.

But it is also relevant closer to home. As Etzioni argues, where parenting is concerned, it is dangerous to pretend that all individuals can have the maximum freedom for self-fulfilment in work and pleasure regardless of whether this implies neglect for their children.

This is why the communitarian argument is such an important challenge to political debate. It transcends the often stale political arguments that accompany moral panics (for example over single parents). It shows a way of reintegrating morality and community into politics without them having to weigh down like the dead hand of traditional authority. And it offers a moral agenda that is compatible with a more open, doubting and freer culture.

This is why Etzioni’s ideas have begun to be influential in the USA. His recent books have become best sellers, a rare achievement for a distinguished sociologist, and his ideas have won the acclaim of politicians as diverse as Al Gore and Jack Kemp. They offer answers, however controversial, to pressing personal and public dilemmas. And they offer clarity in place of the confused way in which morality and obligations are usually discussed.

*Geoff Mulgan*

# Children as a Moral Act

Making a child is a moral act. It obligates the community to the parents. But it also obligates the parents to the community. For we all live with the consequences of children who are not brought up properly, whether bad economic conditions or self-centred parents are to blame. Juvenile delinquents do more than break their parents hearts, and drug abusers do more than give their parents grief. They mug the elderly, hold up stores and petrol stations, and prey on innocent children returning from school. They grow to be useless, or worse, as employees, and they can drain taxpayers' resources and patience. In contrast, well brought up children are more than a joy to their families; they are (oddly, it is necessary to reiterate this) a foundation of proud and successful communities. Therefore, parents have a moral responsibility to the community to invest themselves in the proper upbringing of their children, and communities – to enable parents to so dedicate themselves.<sup>1</sup>

A word about proper upbringing: I do not mean merely feeding children, cleaning their rear ends, and making sure that they do not roam the streets. Those custodial responsibilities are obvious and quite well reflected in our laws. As psychology professor Urie Bronfenbrenner writes: 'Basic medical services and adequate diet, while essential, are not enough by themselves to insure normal physical and psychological development... Beyond health care and nutrition, certain other essential requirements must also be met.'<sup>2</sup>



Our culture wraps newborn infants in a pink mist. Actually those newborn babies are animals with few human traits; left to their own devices, they will crawl on all fours and bark. We know from studies of children who have been monstrously deprived of human contact – hidden away in attics, denied basic warmth and cuddling – that they lack the most basic human attributes, from walking erect to being able to talk. And if all that children receive is custodial care and morally careless education, their bodies will mature, but their souls will not. If the moral representatives of society do not fill the inborn vacuum, television and streets will. We are all too familiar with, and frequently bemoan, the results of this type of ‘education.’ Now I will examine one of our root causes: like charity, education – or the lack there of – begins at home. In order for education to start at home, there must be a home.

# The Parenting Deficit

I rarely discuss this matter in public or with friends without someone exclaiming: 'You're dumping on women!' or 'You believe that women must stay at home and attend to the family's children! Women have the same right as men to work outside the home!' As I see it, the issue is the dearth of parental involvement of both varieties: mothers and fathers.

Consider for a moment parenting as an industry. As farming declined, most fathers left to work away from home. Over the past 20 years millions of mothers have sharply curtailed their work in the 'parenting industry' by moving to work outside the home. By 1991 in the US two-thirds (66.7%) of all mothers with children under eighteen were in the labour force<sup>3</sup> and more than half (55.4%) of women with children under the age of three. In the UK, by the late 1980s 37% of women with a youngest child under 4, and 74% of women with a youngest child aged 10 or over, were in work.<sup>4</sup> At the same time a much smaller number of child care personnel moved into the parenting industry.

If this were any other business, say, shoemaking, and more than half of the labour force had been lost and replaced with fewer, less-qualified hands and we still asked the shoemakers to produce the same number of shoes of the same quality (with basically no changes in technology), we would be considered crazy. But this is what happened to parenting. At first when men and then women left to work outside the home, they were replaced by some child-care services, a relatively small increase in baby-sitters and nannies, and some additional service

by grandparents – leaving parenting woefully shorthanded. The millions of latchkey children, who are left alone for long stretches of time, are but the most visible result of the parenting deficit.

Is this the ‘fault’ of the women’s movement, feminism, or mothers *per se*? Obviously not. All women did was demand for themselves what men had long possessed, working outside the home not only for their own personal satisfaction, but because of what they often perceived as the economic necessity. Whatever the cause, the result is an empty nest. Only it isn’t the small fry who grew up and took off: it is the parents who flew the coop. Those who did not leave altogether increased their investment of time, energy, involvement and commitment outside the home.

Although parenting is the responsibility of both parents – and may well be discharged most effectively in two – parent families immersed in a community context of kin and neighbours – *most important is the scope of commitment*. Single parents may do better than two-career absentee parents. Children require attention, as Robert Bellah and the other authors of *The Good Society* declared. They also require a commitment of time, energy, and, above all, of self.

The prevalent situation is well captured by a public service advertisement in which a mother calls her child and reassures him that she has left money for him next to the phone. ‘Honey, have some dinner’, she mutters as the child takes the twenty dollar bill she left behind, rolls it up, and snorts cocaine. One might add that the father didn’t even call.

The fact is that parenting cannot be carried out over the phone, however well meaning and loving the calls may be. It requires physical presence. The notion of ‘quality time’ (not to mention ‘quality phonecalls’) is a lame excuse for parental absence: it presupposes that bonding and education can take place in brief time bursts, on the run. Quality time occurs within quantity time. As you spend time with your children – fishing, gardening, camping, or just eating a meal – there are unpredictable moments when an opening occurs and education takes hold.

# The Institutionalisation of Children

Is the answer to the parenting deficit to build more child-care centres? After all, other societies have delegated the upbringing of their children, from black nannies in the American South before the Civil War to Greek slaves in ancient Rome. But in these historical situations the person who attended to the children was an adjunct to the parents rather than a replacement for them and an accessory reserved mostly for upper-class families with leisure. A caregiver remained with the family throughout the children's formative years and often beyond: she was, to varying degrees, integrated into the family. The caregiver, in turn, reflected, at least in part, the family's values and educational posture. Some children may have been isolated from their parents, but as a rule there was a warm, committed figure dedicated to them, one who bonded and stayed with them.

Today most childcare centres are woefully understaffed with poorly paid and underqualified personnel. Child care workers in both the USA and UK are in the lowest tenth of all wage earners<sup>5</sup> (with an average salary of \$5.35 per hour in 1988<sup>6</sup>, £5.13 in the UK in 1992). They frequently receive no health insurance or other benefits, which makes child care an even less attractive job. As Edward Zigler, a professor of child development at Yale, put it: 'We pay these people less than we do zoo keepers-and then we expect them to do wonders.'<sup>7</sup> The personnel come and go, at a rate of 41% per year at an average US day care centre.

Bonding between children and caregivers under these circumstances is very difficult to achieve. Moreover, children suffer a loss every time their surrogate parents leave. It would be far from inaccurate to call the worst of these facilities ‘kennels for kids’. There are a few fine, high quality care centres, but they are as rare and almost as expensive as the nannies that some truly affluent families can command. These exceptions should not distract us from the basically dismal picture: sub-standard care and all too frequent warehousing of children, with overworked parents trying frantically to make up the deficit in their spare time.

Government or social supervision of the numerous small institutions and home facilities in which child care takes place to ensure proper sanitation and care, even to screen out child abusers, is difficult and often completely neglected or only nominally carried out. We should not be surprised to encounter abuses such as the case of the child care home in which 54 children were left in the care of a 16 year old and were found strapped into child care seats for the entire day.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly many low income couples and single parents have little or no choice except to use the minimum that such centres provide. All we can offer here is to urge that before parents put their children into such institutions, they should check them out as extensively as possible (including surprise visits in the middle of the day). Moreover we should all support these parents’ quest for additional support from employers and government if they cannot themselves spend more on child care.

Particularly effective are cooperative arrangements that require each parent to contribute some time – perhaps four hours each week – to serve at his or her child’s centre. Not only do such arrangements reduce the centre costs, they also allow parents to see firsthand what actually goes on, ensuring some measure of built in accountability. It provides for continuity – while staff come and go, parents stay. (Even if they divorce, they may still participate in their child care centre.) And as parents get to know other parents of children in the same stages of development, they form social bonds, which can be drawn upon to work together to make these centres more responsive to children’s needs.

Above all, age matters. Infants under two years old are particularly vulnerable to separation anxiety. Several bodies of data strongly indicate that infants who are institutionalised at a young age will not mature into well-adjusted adults.<sup>9</sup> As Edward Zigler puts it: 'We are cannibalizing children. Children are dying in the system, never mind achieving optimum development.' A study of eight year olds by two University of Texas researchers compared children who returned home after school to their mothers with children who remained in day care centres:

children who stayed at the day care centre after school were having problems. They received more negative peer nominations, and their negative nominations outweighed their positive nominations. In addition, the day care third graders made lower academic grades on their report card and scored lower on standardised tests. There was some evidence of poor conduct grades.<sup>10</sup>

Unless the parents are absent or abusive, infants are better off at home. Older children, between two and four, may be able to handle some measures of institutionalization in child care centres, but their personalities often seem too unformed to be able to cope well with a nine to five separation from a parent.

As a person who grew up in Israel, I am sometimes asked whether it is true that kibbutzim succeed in bringing up toddlers in child care centres. I need to note first that unlike the personnel in most American child care centres, the people who care for children in Kibbutzim are some of the most dedicated members of the work force because these communities consider child care to be a very high priority. As a result, child care positions are highly sought after and there is little turnover, which allows for essential bonding to take place. In addition both parents are intimately involved in bringing up their children, and they frequently visit the child care centres, which are placed very close to where they live and work. Even so, Israeli kibbutzim are rapidly dismantling their collective child care centres and returning children to

live with their families because both the families and the community established that even a limited disassociation of children from their parents at a tender age is unacceptable.

There is no sense looking back and beating our breasts over how we got ourselves into the present situation. But we must acknowledge that as a matter of social policy (as distinct from some individual situations) we have made a mistake in assuming that strangers can be entrusted with the effective personality formation of infants and toddlers. Over the last 25 years we have seen the future, and it is not a wholesome one. With poor and ineffective community child care, and with ever more harried parents, it will not suffice to tell their graduates to 'just say no' and expect them to resist all temptations, to forgo illegal drugs and alcohol, and to postpone sexual activity. If we fervently wish them to grow up in a civilised society, and if we seek to live in one, we need to face facts: it will not happen unless we dedicate more of ourselves to our children and their care and education.

# Equality Within the Family

Who needs to bond with children? Both parents. It is no accident that in a wide variety of human societies (from the Zulus to the Inuits, from ancient Greece and ancient China to modernity), there has never been a society that did not have two parent families. Societies have varied a great deal in the roles they assigned to other members of the family (aunts, uncles, grandparents) and in the educational roles of other members of the tribe. They have also varied a great deal in the specifics of the relationship between the parents and the child. But in the hundreds of known societies throughout recorded history, two-parent families have been the norm.

To be quite clear: to argue that the two parent family is ‘better’ than the single parent family is in no way to denigrate single parents. It’s akin to saying that for most purposes a two-bedroom home is better than a one-bedroom home. Moreover, just because most people prefer a two-bedroom home does not mean that those who have a home with only one bedroom are in it only or firstly by their choice.

There are several compelling reasons why two-parent families are the most suitable form for children. First, child care and education are highly labour-intensive, demanding tasks. Young children are a very needy bunch. They can soak up huge amounts of care, attention and love. Second, parenting works best when there is a division of educational labour. One parent may be more supportive, the source of emotional security that all children require if they dare to grow up in a



threatening world. The other parent may be more achievement oriented, pushing children to extend themselves beyond the comfortable cradle of love.<sup>11</sup>

In many countries mothers have historically often fulfilled the former role, while fathers have typically adopted the latter. But the two-piston engine of effective education can work the other way around. Indeed, in some contemporary families children are cuddled by their fathers and disciplined by their mothers. What matters most is the two parent mode. True, some single parents can shift back and forth between the supportive and achievement oriented modes of parenting quite successfully. But this is difficult to accomplish on top of other difficulties faced by a single parent, who is often the sole breadwinner as well.

Another essential feature for a family effectively to carry out its parenting mission is a mutually supportive educational coalition. The parents as educational agents, must be mutually supportive because their specific educational goals are in part contradictory. Goaded children to achieve generates stress ('Did you prepare for your maths test yet?'), while reassuring them generates a relaxation response ('Don't overdo it – Rome wasn't built in a day'). Hence, only if the parents are basically in agreement can they make education work and avoid being unwittingly played off one against the other by their children, to the detriment of education. (This is, of course, a major reason divorced parents have such a hard time working together to bring up their children, even when they have joint custody.)

The sequence of divorce followed by a succession of partners, a second marriage, and frequently another divorce and another turnover of partners often means a repeatedly disrupted educational coalition. Each change in participants involves a change in the educational agenda for the child. Each new partner cannot be expected to pick up the previous one's educational post and programme. The educational input that each adult provides is deeply affected by his or her total personality and upbringing. As a result, changes in parenting partners means, at best, a deep disruption in a child's education, though of course several disruptions cut deeper into the effectiveness of the educational coalition than just one. (The discussion presumes, somewhat

optimistically, that new partners are willing to get involved in the first place.)

The ill results are reflected in the following statistics, which are but a sample of many that could be cited. A 1991 study by the National Centre for Health Statistics found that children living in single parent families and stepfamilies were more likely to fail in school and to require treatment for emotional and behavioural disorders as compared with children living with both biological parents.<sup>12</sup> The incidence, for example, of children who needed to repeat a year varied from only 12% among children living with both biological parents to nearly twice as many (22%) among those who were living with stepfamilies (and with divorced mothers) and 30% who were living with never married mothers. The incidence of children suspended from school was 4% among 'intact' families, 9% among stepfamilies, 11% among children living with divorced mothers, and 15% among children living with never married mothers.<sup>13</sup> Some social scientists point out that these differences reflect economic differences – for instance, that divorced parents are less well off than those who are married.<sup>14</sup> But this factor itself reflects the decline of the family. The dismembering of the family thus hits the children like a one-two punch: first directly, by disrupting the educational coalition of the parents, and second indirectly, by dividing them between two households that are more costly to run than one.

When I testified on these matters before a US Senate committee, I was asked whether I was implying that single parents cannot bring up children properly. I answered: 'As I read the social science findings, it would be preferable to have three parents per child, or to draw upon grandparents and child care staff to supplement, but not replace, their two parents. Parenting is a heavy duty load for single parents to carry entirely on their own, especially if they are employed full-time outside the household.' I should have added that the sad fact is that most divorced fathers quickly fade away as parents, and that fathers who were never married to their children's mothers infrequently play a paternal role.

# The Valuation of Children

When discussing parental responsibilities many ask how it is possible to have more time for children if the parents need to work full-time to make ends meet. Our response requires an examination of the value of children as compared to other 'priorities'.

Nobody likes to admit it, but between 1960 and 1990 American and British society allowed children to be devalued, while the golden call of 'making it' was put on a high pedestal. Recently, first year undergraduates listed 'being well off financially' as more important than 'raising a family'.<sup>15</sup> (In 1990 the figures were 74% versus 70% respectively, and in 1991 they were 74% versus 68%.) *Kramer vs Kramer*, a novel and film that both captured the era and helped popularise its values, stressed the right of women to find themselves, to discover their identities, and to follow their careers the way men do.

Some blame this development on the women's rights movement, others on the elevation of materialism and greed to new historical heights. These and other factors may have all combined to devalue children. However, women are obviously entitled to all the same rights men are, including the pursuit of greed.

But few people who advocated equal rights for women favoured a society in which sexual equality would mean a society in which all adults would act like men, who in the past were relatively inattentive to children. The new gender-equalised world was supposed to be a combination of all that was sound and ennobling in the traditional roles of

women and men. Women were to be free to work any place they wanted, and men would be free to show emotion, care, and domestic commitment. For children this was not supposed to mean, as it often has, that they would be bereft of dedicated parenting. Now that we have seen the result of decades of widespread neglect of children, the time has come for both parents to revalue children and for the community to support and recognise their efforts. Parents should be entitled not just to equal pay for equal work, equal credit and housing opportunities, and the right to choose a last name: they also must bear equal responsibilities – above all, for their children.

A major 1991 report by the National Commission on Children, in effect, is a national call for revaluation of children.<sup>16</sup> Joseph Duffey, the president of the American University, and Anne Wexley, a leading liberal, have also expressed the renewed commitment. ‘Perhaps, in the end’ they wrote, ‘the great test for American society will be this: whether we are capable of caring and sacrificing for the future of children. For the future of children other than our own, and for children of future generations. Whether we are capable of caring and sacrificing that they might have a future of opportunity.’<sup>17</sup> In the 1950s, mothers who worked outside the home were made to feel guilty by questions such as ‘Doesn’t Jenny mind eating lunch in school?’ By the 1980s the moral voice had swung the other way. Now women, not to mention men, who chose to be homemakers were put down by comments such as ‘Oh, you’re not working,’ the implication being that if one did not pursue a career outside the house, there was nothing to talk to you about. We need to return to a situation in which committed parenting is an honourable vocation.

One major way that commitment may be assessed is by the number of hours that are dedicated to a task over the span of a day. According to a 1985 study by a University of Maryland sociologist, parents spent an average of only 17 hours per week with their children, compared with 30 in 1965.<sup>18</sup> Even this paltry amount of time is almost certainly an overstatement of the case because it is based on self-reporting. And although guilt is not a social force I recommend building on, if any finger pointing is to be done, a finger should be pointed at those who,

in effect, abandon their children to invest themselves whole hog in other pursuits.

And we all need to chip in. Many parents point to the great difficulty they have in teaching their children right from wrong. They remind us they are fighting a culture that bombards their children with unwholesome messages: that it is supremely important to keep up with the Joneses; that you can discharge your human duties and express your feelings by buying something; that violence and raw sex are as pervasive and corrosive as shown on TV and in music tapes, discs, and records. A community that is more respectful of children would *make parenting a less taxing and more fulfilling experience*.

This revaluation of the importance of children has two major ramifications. First, potential parents must consider what is important to them: more income or better relationships with their children. Most people cannot 'have it all'. They must face the possibility that they will have to curtail their gainful employment in order to invest more time and energy into their offspring. This may hurt their chances of making money directly (by working fewer hours) or indirectly (by advancing more slowly in their careers).

Many parents, especially those on lower incomes, argue that they both desire gainful employment not because they enjoy it or seek self-expression, as many radical individualists would have it, but because they 'cannot make ends meet' otherwise. They feel that both parents have no choice but to work fulltime outside the home if they are to pay for the rent, food, clothing, and other basics. A 1990 Gallup poll found that one-half of those households with working mothers would want the mother to stay home if 'money were not an issue'.<sup>19</sup> (The same question should have been asked about fathers.)

This sense of economic pressure certainly has a strong element of reality. Many couples in the nineties need two paycheques to buy little more than what a couple in the early seventies could acquire with a single income. There are millions of people these days, especially the poor and the near poor, who are barely surviving, even when both parents do work long and hard outside the home. If they have several children and work for low wages, they may need to draw on the support of

others just to stay afloat. A growing number of working-class families and some of those in the lower reaches of the middle class have also fallen on hard economic times. And surely many single women must work to support themselves and their children. But at some level of income, which is lower than the conventional wisdom would have us believe, parents do begin to have a choice between enhanced earnings and attending to their children.

There is considerable disagreement as to what that level might be. Several social scientists have shown that most of what many wealthier people consider 'essentials' are actually purchases that their cultures and communities tell them are 'essential', rather than what is objectively required.<sup>20</sup> They point out that objectively people need rather little: shelter, liquids, a certain amount of calories and vitamins a day, and a few other such things that can be bought quite cheaply. Most of what people *feel* that they 'must have' – from VCRs to shoes that match their handbags to Nike sneakers to designer frames for their sunglasses – is socially conditioned. This is further documented by the fact that what is considered 'necessary' varies a great deal within the society and over time. Some people cannot live without fancy jeans. Others 'need' garden gnomes on their front lawns (and the lawns themselves!). A colleague who lives in a suburb of New York City was miffed by my implied criticism of people who are so preoccupied with consumer goods that they do not attend adequately to their children. In his letter to me, he observed that because he and his wife had worked long hours outside the household, they were able to buy cars for their children. Well, the children might just have been better off if they'd had to walk or bike but had more time with their parents. In short, although there may be conflicting notions regarding how high an income level is sufficient for people to satisfy their basic needs, there is clearly a level at which they are able to make choices.

A colleague who read an earlier version of these pages suggested that the preceding line of argument sounds as if social scientists wish to cement the barriers between the classes and not allow lower-class people to aspire to higher status. Hardly so. They are arguing not that people should lead a life of denial and poverty, but that they have, and

make, choices all the time, whether or not they are aware of this fact. They choose between a more rapid climb up the social ladder and spending more time with their children. Communitarians would add that in the long run parents will find more satisfaction and will contribute more to the community if they heed their children more than their social status less. But even if they choose to order their priorities the other way around, let it not be said that they did not make a choice. Careerism is not a law of nature.

We return then to the value we as a community put on having and bringing up children. In a society that places more value on Armani suits, winter skiing, and summer houses than on education, parents are under pressure to earn more, whatever their income. They feel that it is important to work overtime and to dedicate themselves to enhancing their incomes and advancing their careers. We must recognise now, after two decades of celebrating greed and in the face of a generation of neglected children, the importance of educating one's children.

Take a couple of successful young professionals – lawyers, perhaps – who are planning to have a child. They need to decide whether they will continue to invest themselves entirely in their work – putting in long hours at the office, taking briefcases full of work home at night, seeing and entertaining clients on the weekends – or whether they will lighten up on their workload once the child is born. (Lightening up, or course, will reduce their billable hours, and hence their income, and may even delay the time it takes for them to make partner.) They must further decide how much parental leave they are going to take, whether they will try to work different schedules so that at least one of them can be at home at most times, and whether one or both of them will try to work more at home than in the office. (These choices will, in turn, be deeply affected by what their law firms will welcome or at least tolerate; but the firms, too, are likely to be influenced by changing societal values.) All these decisions reflect more the tension between commitment to a child and to a career and money; they also show that even if both parents choose to remain gainfully employed full-time, they still have several options in terms of the relative intensity of their commitment to their children versus other values.

# Inner Joy

Although the shift from consumerism and careerism to an emphasis on children is largely one of values, it has some rewarding payoffs. Employers keep complaining, correctly, that the young workers who present themselves on their doorsteps are undertrained. A good part of what they mean is a deficiency of character and an inability to control impulses, defer gratification, and commit to the task at hand. If businesses would cooperate with parents to make it easier for them to earn a living and attend to their children, the corporate payoffs would be more than social approbation: they would gain a labour force that is much better able to perform. The community, too, would benefit by having members who are not merely more sensitive to one another and more caring but also more likely to contribute to the commonweal. Last but not least, parents would discover that although there are some failures despite the best intentions and strongest dedication, and although there are no guarantees or refunds in bringing up children, *by and large you reap what you sow*. If people dedicate a part of their lives to their kids, they are likely to have sons and daughters who will make them proud and fill their old age with love.

Ann Landers, a syndicated American columnist, published a letter by a person who attended his class reunion and was depressed because he did not have the material success of many of his classmates. This



triggered many replies, of which the following is a fair sample:

My husband is probably one of the guys he admires. We have moved six times in ten years, always for a better-paying, more prestigious job. Each move requires establishing new friendships and becoming part of the community. I dream of staying in one place long enough for my children to develop ongoing relationships, but I know it will never happen.

We drive the BMW that 'Class of '73' admires as a status symbol. Actually, we have two. Sounds wonderful? Not really. What I wouldn't give for a husband who is satisfied with his job, his salary, and the city we live in.<sup>21</sup>

Ethical theorists have a device that helps people sort out their priorities. They ask you to consider what you would like to have written on your tombstone, how you would like to summarise your life's work. Would you prefer to have it written that you had made more money than you ever believed possible, more than your schoolmates or neighbours? Or would you rather be remembered for helping to bring up some lovely human beings, your children? Having actively participated in bringing up five lovely children, I would conclude that children are not pieces of property that you add to your acquisitions and then turn over to a staff. As the great ethicist Immanuel Kant would have put it, children are ends in themselves, persons full of value – like you and me.

The community – that is, all of us – suffers the ill effects of *absentee* parenting. For example, according to a study by social scientist Jean Richardson and her colleagues, thirteen year old students who took care of themselves for eleven or more hours a week were twice as likely to be abusers of controlled substances (that is, smoke marijuana or tobacco and drink alcohol) as those who were actively cared for by adults.<sup>22</sup> 'The increased risk appeared no matter what the sex, race, or socioeconomic status of the children,' Richardson and associates noted.<sup>23</sup> The study found that 31% of latchkey children had two or

more drinks at a time, compared with 17% for supervised children; 27% of the latchkey children expected to get drunk in the future, compared with only 15% of the others. And students who took care of themselves for eleven or more hours a week were one and a half to two times more likely 'to score high on risk taking, anger, family conflict, and stress' than those who did not care for themselves, a later study by Jean Richardson and her colleagues found.<sup>24</sup>

James Q. Wilson, discussing Travis Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency*, reports:

The number of delinquent acts, as reported by the children themselves, was powerfully influenced by the children's attachment to the parents. The closer the mother's supervision of the child, the more intimate the child's communication with the father, and the greater the affection between child and parents, the less the delinquency. Even when the father held a low-status job, the stronger the child's attachment to him, the less the delinquency. Other factors also contributed to delinquency, such as whether the child did well in and liked school, but these factors were themselves affected by family conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Other studies point to the same dire consequences.<sup>26</sup>

Gang warfare in the streets, massive drug abuse, a poorly committed work force, and a strong sense of entitlement and weak sense of responsibility are, to large extent, the product of poor parenting. True, economic and social factors also play a role. But a lack of effective parenting is a major cause, and the other factors could be handled more readily if we remained committed to the importance of the upbringing of the young. The fact is, given the same economic and social conditions, *in poor neighbourhoods one finds decent and hard-working children right next to antisocial ones. Likewise, in affluent suburbs one finds antisocial children right next to decent, hardworking ones.* The difference is often a reflection of the homes they come from.

# What Can We Do?

What we need now, first of all, is to return more hands and, above all, more voices to the 'parenting industry'. This can be accomplished in several ways, all of which are quite familiar but are not being dealt with nearly often enough.

Given the forbearance of trade unions and employers, it is possible for millions of parents *to work at home*. Computers, modems, up- and downlinks, satellites, and other modern means of communication can allow you to trade commodities worldwide without ever leaving your den, to provide answers on a medical hot line from a corner of the living room, or to process insurance claims and edit books from a desk placed anywhere in the house.

If both parents must work outside the household, it is preferable if they can arrange to *work different shifts*, to increase the all-important parental presence. Some couples manage with *only one working full-time and the other part-time*. In some instances two parents can *share one job* and the parenting duties (for example, the post of Washington deputy bureau chief for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is shared by a couple). Some find *flexitime* work that allows them to come in late or leave late (or make some other adjustments in their schedule) if the other parent is detained at work, a child is sick, and so on.

These are not pie-in-the-sky, futuristic ideas. Several of the largest firms already provide one or more of these family-friendly features. DuPont had in 1992 two thousand employees working flexitime. IBM

has a 'flexible work leave of absence' plan that allows employees to work up to three years part-time and still collect full-employment benefits. Avon Products and a subsidiary of Knight-Ridder newspapers have their own versions of these programmes, and the list goes on.<sup>27</sup>

Public policies could further sustain the family. Child allowances, which are common in Europe, could provide each family with some additional funds when a child is born. Others suggest a program, modeled after the GI Bill in the US, that would give parents who stay home 'points' toward future educational or retraining expenses.<sup>28</sup>

These measures require a commitment on the part of parents, to work things out so that they can discharge more of their parenting responsibilities, and on the side of firms and the government, to make effective parenting possible.

*The debate over whether parents should be allowed three months of unpaid leave is ridiculous*, a sign of how much we have lost our sense of the importance of parenting. A bill considered in Congress in 1991 would have mandated only twelve weeks of *unpaid* leave and only for companies with more than fifty employees. The bill passed Congress, but President Bush vetoed it.<sup>29</sup> Even *Working Mother* magazine, in its yearly listing of the best companies for working parents, requires that a company provide protection of a new mother's job for only *six weeks* after childbirth to qualify for the *best* rating.<sup>30</sup> The U.S. Navy used to discharge women who became pregnant. Now it allows them six weeks of paid maternity leave, after which they are expected to return to work. They are expected to resume sea duty four months after giving birth.<sup>31</sup>

No one can form the minimal bonding a newborn child requires in such woefully brief periods of time. A typical finding is that infants who were subject to 20 hours a week of nonparental care are insecure in their relationships with their parents at the end of the first year and more likely to be aggressive between the ages of three and eight.<sup>32</sup> (One can disagree with all findings. Some social scientists argue that these data are the effects not of child care but of poor child care. But it is not accidental that we have often had inadequate child care. To provide quality child care would cost more than many young women or men earn.) If children who are two years or younger are too young to

be institutionalised in child care centres, a bare minimum of two years of intensive parenting is essential.

The fact that this recommendation is considered utopian is troubling, not merely for parents and children, but for all who care about the future of this society. Let's state it here unabashed: Firms should provide six months of paid leave and another year and a half (eighteen months) of unpaid leave. (The costs should be shared by the employers of the father and the mother.) Of the eighteen months, the government should cover six months from public funds (many European countries do at least this much), and the rest should be absorbed by the family.

Given increased governmental support and corporate flexibility, each couple must work out its own division of labour. In one family I know, the mother is a nurse and the father a day labourer. She is earning much more, and he found it attractive to work occasionally outside the home while making the care of their two young daughters his prime responsibility. He responds to calls from people who need a tow truck; if the calls come while his wife is not at home, he takes his daughters with him. I met them when he towed my car. They seemed a happy lot, but he was a bit defensive about the fact that he was the home parent; he giggled when he spoke about the way his domestic life was structured. The community's moral voice should fully approve of this arrangement rather than expect that the woman be the parent who stays at home. At the same time there should be no social stigma attached to women who prefer to make their choices; stigmatizing any of them is hardly a way to encourage parenting. Re-elevating the value of children will help bring about the needed change of heart.

# Is the Family An Endangered Species?

Scientists are all too familiar with factoids. Factoids are ‘facts’ that many people believe to be true but are not. Thus it is a factoid that if a lemming jumps off a cliff, all the others in tow will take a dive. It is a factoid that Inuits have a large number of terms for snow (because, it is said, snow is much more important in their lives than in ours). And it is a factoid that the family is a goner, that only 14% (of 6% or 7%) of all American families fit the traditional format. Radical individualists use these dismal statistics to bolster their argument that the nuclear family cannot be resurrected because it has been replaced by a wide variety of other ‘families’, from single-parent households to gay couples. Ruth Messinger, currently the Manhattan Borough president, put the figure vividly, saying that the ‘mythical nuclear family today describes only one in 17 American families.’<sup>33</sup> Representative Mary Jane Gibson stated in a hearing before the Massachusetts State Legislature that fewer than 10% of American families resemble the familiar model of mother as caregiver and father as breadwinner.<sup>34</sup> They maintain that the nuclear family has changed from being the basic cell of the societal body to serving as just one among several ‘life-style’ options.

To get at the truth behind this factoid, one must note that radical individualists’ definition of the family includes elements that have been historically associated with nuclear families but are not essential to them. By their definition a family ‘must have’ a father, who is the sole wage earner; a mother, who is a full-time homemaker; and *two*

children.<sup>35</sup> This arrangement is hardly necessary for the family to discharge its prime responsibility: to lay the basic foundations for the moral education of the next generation. Hence, these are, in effect, antifamily statistics, figures that are used to belittle the family. Actually, in the USA the majority of preschool children (about 78%) live in functioning families of one kind or another: 33% in families in which the father works outside the house and the mother is at home; 29% in which both parents work full-time; and 16% in which the married mother works part-time.<sup>36</sup> In the UK three-quarters of the population live in families headed by a married couple <sup>37</sup>, only marginally less than in 1961. The two-parent family is less common than it used to be, but it is far from dying out.

# Should We Curb Divorce?

If two-parent families were just one option among many, there would be no reason to be concerned about the high rate of divorce. But since the evidence strongly suggests that intact families are to be preferred, divorce becomes more problematic. One first notes that divorce removes parents from their children, often completely. Most fathers ignore their offspring from first marriages shortly after they set up new families, if not before. Even in the period soon after divorce, only one-sixth of all children see their fathers even once a week; close to one-half do not see them at all. After ten years practically two-thirds have *no contact*.<sup>38</sup> Single mothers, who are typically the custodial parents, are even more subject to economic pressures that diminish parenting than their married counterparts. In addition, divorce has detrimental effects all its own, as children often become pawns in bitter conflicts and entangled in cross loyalties. As a result, many feel – quite understandably – abandoned and unloved.

After divorce, children are also frequently faced with a bewildering rotation of their parents' boyfriends or girlfriends. Many of these transients develop some kind of relationship with the children; then they too vanish, for reasons that the children cannot fathom and all too often presume to be their fault. If and when they finally have step-parents, children often find that the second marriages are even less stable than the first. And although some stepparents develop remarkably close relations with their stepchildren, much more common are the tense relations mythologised in tales such as Cinderella.



True, social science studies of the effects of divorces have produced conflicting findings, and one can always further question any and all findings. Douglas Besharov, a family expert at the American Enterprise Institute, has this to say about the finding that people are happier in marriage than on their own: 'Well, maybe people who are happier enter marriages.'<sup>39</sup> But much evidence indicates that dismembering the family is harmful under most circumstances. Claire Berman, the author of *Adult Children of Divorce Speak Out*, contends that among children of divorce 'a hole in the heart is universal. There is a sense of having missed out on something that is a birthright, the right to grow up in a house of two parents.'<sup>40</sup> Personally I do not know of a single instance in which the children were not harmed by divorce, although there are significant differences in the extent of harm, and clearly some rotten marriages can cause as much harm as (or even more harm) than divorce.

Family expert David Popenoe effectively summarises the problem divorce poses for children in his discussion of the 'new familism':

It is a fact that much of the voluntary family breakup occurring recently has a negative impact on children. Certainly, I have never met the child who did not want to be raised, if possible, by both biological parents who stayed together and cooperated in child-rearing at least until the child's maturity (and hopefully for life).<sup>41</sup>

In her book *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce*, Judith Wallerstein reports that children entering adolescence immediately following their parents' divorce are particularly vulnerable.

In our study, one out of three of the young men and one in ten of the young women between ages nineteen and twenty-three at the ten-year mark are delinquent, meaning they act out their anger in a range of illegal activities including assault, burglary, arson, drug dealing, theft, drunk

driving, and prostitution. Many of these children got involved in one episode of breaking the law before age eighteen, but a disturbing number of them continue this delinquency pattern into their early twenties.

She adds:

The kind of misbehaviour that we see – abuse of drugs and alcohol, petty vandalism, and the like – is widespread in our society, divorce or no divorce. Although such misbehaviour emerges in children of divorce, the more frequent pattern in their lives is one of underachievement, low self-esteem, and inhibition of anger related to feelings of rejection.<sup>42</sup>

Other studies found the effect of divorce on children to be apparent in their academic, social, moral, and physical development as well as their emotional development. Teenagers from homes with a stepparent or a single parent are more likely to drop out of school than teenagers from families in which both natural parents are present.<sup>43</sup> A 1991 study by researchers at Princeton and Johns Hopkins universities found that ‘growing up in a single-parent family has negative consequences for a student’s grade point average, school attendance, and ... educational attainment.’ The researchers found the same effects in children who were growing up in stepparent families.<sup>44</sup> A national health survey shows that children from single-parent families or step-families were two to three times more likely to have had emotional or behavioral problems than those who had both of their biological parents in the home.<sup>45</sup>

30% of two-parent elementary school students were ranked as high achievers, while only 17% of one-parent students were, according to a study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Conversely, 23% of the two-parent students were low achievers, while 38% of the one-parent students were. The children of one-parent families were more likely to be truant, late, disciplined, and to drop out of

school.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, 70% of juveniles in state reform institutions were children of one-parent or no-parent families.<sup>47</sup>

Psychiatrist James M. Herzog of the Children's Hospital Medical Centre in Boston studies the effects of the absence of an active father figure on young children.<sup>48</sup> His findings imply that the father's absence may have specific and long-range consequences for the way young children deal with aggressive drives. Among the 72 children of divorce whom he studied, the absence of the father was especially disruptive for the children, almost all of them boys between one and a half and five years old. The very youngest typically had nightmares about monsters; those three to five years old were apt to be highly macho, hyperaggressive, and preoccupied with ideas of stern male discipline. In children of both sexes aged five to seven years old, depression – which is aggression turned inward – was the more common result.<sup>49</sup> Herzog suggests that parents monitor and absorb a variety of feelings and conflicts for one another and that this interaction creates a 'protective shield' that allows both to be caring, effective parents. When the father leaves, this shield tends to break down and leave the children vulnerable.<sup>50</sup>

Children of divorce carry within them the seed of later trouble. Children who were under 16 years of age at the time of their parents' divorce or separation were more likely to get divorced themselves, according to a 1987 study by University of Texas sociologists Norval Glenn and Kathryn Kramer.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, a surprising finding is that divorce deeply hurts not merely young children, but also adolescents and even older offspring. Affective disorder is from one and a half to two times as likely to occur in women whose parents had separated than among those whose parents had stayed together, according to a study of 3,000 adults by British psychiatrist Bryan Rodgers.<sup>52</sup>

There may be alternative explanations for some of these findings, and they are far from universally accepted. For example, Jessie Bernard, a distinguished sociologist and feminist, reviewed several early studies of stepchildren; she found a more varied and complex picture than the studies cited above.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, economic background factors deeply confound the picture. Single parents are often poorer than married

ones, and hence it is hard to distinguish between the effects of poverty and the presence of only one effective parent. And to reiterate, there are some marriages for which divorce is the preferred solution. The most reasonable conclusion, based on a whole body of data, rather than dwelling on this or that study, *is that divorce should not be banned or condemned, but that it should be discouraged. Easy divorces for parents are not in the interest of children, the community, or as we shall see, the adults involved.*

# Changing the Moral Voice

There is no magic pill that one can prescribe that will make married people get along better with one another, and there is no lever that ought to be pulled that will again make divorce a source of stigma. There are, however, ways to encourage young people to enter marriage more responsibly, help sustain and enrich those marriages that are in place, and at the same time reflect the moral voice of the community that marriages are not to be treated as disposable relations.

## Before Marriage

To avoid the rush to divorce, we need to further slow the rush to marriage. Many churches and synagogues are pointing the way. Priests, ministers, and rabbis are refusing to marry couples who walk in off the street. They insist that the prospective bride and groom first attend some group counselling sessions and learn the secrets of joint decision making, mutual respect, budget making, and so on.

In Modesto, California, sixty-three religious leaders agreed to enforce a four-month *waiting period* for couples planning to marry, which must include at least two counselling sessions. The statement announcing the policy argued that ‘couples who seriously participate in premarital testing and counselling will have a better understanding of what the marriage commitment involves... We acknowledge that a wedding is but a day; a marriage is for a lifetime.’<sup>54</sup> At Modesto’s First

Baptist Church, there is an eight-month waiting period. During this time, the prospective bride and groom meet at least eight times with a church instructor.<sup>55</sup> The minister for singles at the church says that half of the couples who took the course in the past six years decided not to marry. The minister called the program 'effective divorce prevention.'<sup>56</sup>

These waiting periods may well be too long for some. Time by itself is not as important as opportunities for couples to explore the depth of their commitment, to establish if they have the basic communication skills that stable and satisfactory relations require, and to develop these communication skills if they are deficient.

If the community starts to counsel young people about marriage earlier, those seeking to marry would be better prepared. One way this could be achieved is if *schools offered more courses on human relations*. These would help to improve all human interactions, not merely the relations between married people. We know all too well how to confront, to be contentious, and to guard our turf and rights. It seems we would all be better off if we learned less abrasive and more socially beneficial ways of resolving differences. This is a subject that can be taught, although it is often better taught through role playing than through lectures. In such courses people learn to attack issues rather than one another; to avoid bringing up past events when a recent matter is under review; and to set specific times during which to discuss certain matters. Studies show that about the same number of conflicts occur in 'good' and 'bad' marriages; the difference is that the partners in solid and relatively happy marriages have developed less bruising and more effective means of dealing with their differences.<sup>57</sup> (*The Intimate Enemy*, by George R. Bach and Peter Wyden, provides a popular discussion of one approach.)<sup>58</sup>

Two psychologists, John Gottman and Lowell Krokoff, conducted a study that examined the development of marriages over a three-year period.<sup>59</sup> The researchers found that partners may be able to deescalate fights by paraphrasing one another's arguments and searching for a solution rather than continuing to disagree. As Gottman notes, 'Couples who have healthy fights develop a kind of marital efficacy that makes the marriage stronger as time goes on.'<sup>60</sup>

Howard Markman, a psychologist who runs a project at the University of Denver to train couples to handle conflict, found that couples who learn how to argue well were unhappy at first but became more satisfied later.<sup>61</sup> The divorce rate after six years for couples who had undergone the training was half that of couples who had not.

Another way to proceed is to arrange for what a law professor called 'precommitments', which in effect would add to the existing marital vows. Professor Elizabeth Scott of the University of Virginia School of Law suggests that couples who are about to marry or are already married would agree with one another that if they reached a point where they considered divorce, they would (1) delay their decision for two to three years; (2) participate in marital counselling; and (3) accept that the spouse seeking a divorce would make extra economic sacrifices.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, laws may be changed to require a waiting period for couples who seek to get married to allow more time for second thoughts in times when impulses run high. Note also that easy divorce makes people enter marriage too easily. And as they expect it likely not to last, they invest less of themselves to make it work. Thus divorce breeds still more divorce.<sup>63</sup> For the same reason, entering marriage more responsibly is going to make it more durable, which in turn will enhance the couples' commitments to make their marriage succeed.

### **During Marriage**

The ritual of the family meal – which was once as integral to Americans' daily routine as tooth brushing – has been recently extolled by a list of eminent social observers, from Robert Bellah and his colleagues to an assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Bellah and company approach the family meal with reverence:

The family meal ... is the chief family celebration, even a family sacrament... If everyone joins in the common tasks, husband as well as wife, and children, too, as much as they are able, then the family can enjoy at least several common

meals a week, celebrate the pleasure they have in each other's presence and the good things they have mutually helped to prepare. Mealtime, as anyone who has ever had children knows, can also produce conflicts; but learning how to resolve them, to listen and be listened to, is part of the indispensable educational function of the common meal. We can be sure that having a common meal, and one to which all contribute, results in a warmer family and an enhancement of everyone's capacity for attention.<sup>64</sup>

And Patrick F. Fagan of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services argues that one of the 'actions and reforms' needed in the area of family is

that families return to the common practice of family dinner together, to have at least one hour together each day, talking about the usual trivia which make up most normal days. Father's presence is crucial for it to be a family hour. Workplace expectations of fathers will need to adapt accordingly.<sup>65</sup>

This is but one example out of many ways to enhance marriage. Others include programs run by religious organizations (such as marriage 'encounters'), renewal of vows, and marriage counselling.

### **Before Divorce**

The adoption of 'braking' mechanisms that foster extensive consideration before divorce proceedings begin has been suggested by William Galston, a leading Communitarian who previously served as the issues director of Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential campaign.<sup>66</sup> One of the measures he suggests has also been recommended by Britain's Law Commission.<sup>67</sup> A couple would be required to use the nine months after they informed a court of their decision to divorce to settle the important details of the divorce. Issues involving their children would take precedence, and the couple would have to decide these before



they would be allowed to return to court and be granted a divorce. The idea is that this would encourage parents to concentrate on the results of a family breakup and possibly discourage the divorce.

Another method of using waiting periods to discourage divorce is currently being debated in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma State Legislature has proposed measures that would make couples think twice about divorce and remarriage: a recent bill would require that couples who get a divorce wait nine months before remarrying.<sup>68</sup>

I support such waiting periods, albeit reluctantly. First of all, I dislike the idea of regulating human conduct with ever more laws and regulations. Second, a cooling-off period of as little as thirty days may not suffice, and it may very well be impractical to insist on a longer waiting period. I would, however, use Galston's proposal as an example to make a general point about the communitarian role of law.

We tend to think of laws as coercive, punitive, and deterring. This is all quite true. They correctly bring to mind courts, jails, and fines. Therefore their use as a social tool should be minimised. But there is another use for laws. They can serve to communicate and symbolise those values that the community holds dear. This is one reason communitarians do not wish to see the legalization of the use of narcotics. It would send the wrong message by implying that the community approves of people being in a drug-induced stupor.

In her book *A Bortion and Divorce in Western Law*, Mary Ann Glendon discusses the difference between the messages being sent to Europeans and to Americans through their varying laws that address divorce.<sup>69</sup> Although many Europeans still view divorce as something to be avoided, for many Americans divorce has become more socially acceptable. Specifically it was the implementation of no-fault divorce laws that has detracted from the significance of marriage vows. No-fault divorce was advocated originally as a practical solution to the problem of expensive, messy divorces and as a way to remove the government from people's personal lives. But it has had the effect of sanctioning divorce; it sends a moral message that marriage is a relationship that exists primarily for the fulfilment of the individual spouses. If it ceases to perform this function, no one is to blame and

either spouse may terminate it at will. In this way, Glendon concludes, current divorce laws serve to inform the community that marriage is no longer a permanent contract.

Women were among the most outspoken advocates of no-fault divorce because they believed it would strengthen their rights. Ironically, as Lenore Weitzman explains in her book *The Divorce Revolution*, the major effect of the change has been to harm the woman's bargaining position and to make divorce more financially rewarding for the non-custodial parent, usually the father.<sup>70</sup>

The moral seal of approval on no-fault divorce, combined with the generally unequal division of assets, sends a clear message to men, who are more likely to initiate divorce, that abandoning their responsibilities to their families is acceptable to the community. If divorce is to be discouraged, this moral message is to be reversed and its economic consequences changed accordingly.<sup>71</sup>

### Economic Sanctions

Galston argues that it is insufficient merely to express unequivocally society's moral opinion. 'Mandatory declarations – laws with teeth – are typically needed to convince citizens that the community is serious about its professed standards of responsibility. From drunk driving to racial discrimination, vigorous enforcement backed by sanctions has proved essential in changing behaviour.'<sup>72</sup>

David T. Ellwood of Harvard University, in his book *Poor Support*, suggests that the system of providing child support should be modified so that all parents have a responsibility to their children, whether they live with them or not.<sup>73</sup> To this effect, he suggests that both parents' Social Security or National Insurance numbers should be registered on a child's birth certificate, so that it would be possible to find either parent if he or she left the child. He further suggests that all absent parents be required to allot a portion of their income to the support of their children and that these payments be withheld from their paycheques like National Insurance. Failure to make these payments would be considered 'an offense comparable to tax evasion.'<sup>74</sup> In this way the

responsibility of absent parents would be clearly expressed and enforced. The increased responsibilities of absent fathers, Ellwood suggests, would reduce the 'financial incentive to create single-parent families.'<sup>75</sup>

Another measure, it seems to me, would be in case of divorce, to divide the family's assets not between fathers and mothers, but three ways, with the third part going to whoever is the custodial parent (typically the mother). The size of the third part would depend on the number and ages of the children. As far as I can determine, this is an idea that has not been discussed, let alone implemented by policy makers, so far. However, it is much in line with Mary Ann Glendon's widely recognised notion of 'children first', the idea that their needs should take precedence in any divorce arrangements. Other students of public policy favour positive economic incentives to make it easier for families to dedicate themselves to children and to make parents, mainly fathers, less inclined to walk out. The UK, like many other European societies, still provides parents with an allowance for each child they have, as well as numerous services from health care to counselling. Two economists, C. Eugene Steuerle and Jason Juffras, suggest a \$1,000 refundable tax credit for every child, which in effect would serve as a form of child allowance.<sup>76</sup>

Another option that has been widely discussed is income tax exemption for children. But if we proceed in that direction, parents who both work outside the household will be favoured over those households in which one of the parents (or both, in part) stay home to attend to the children. The reason is that while child allowances (or tax credits, if properly crafted) are allotted to all parents, tax exemptions help only those who have taxable incomes. And it provides much more of a benefit for the rich than for those less well off, especially to families in which more time is dedicated to parenting and less to generating income. A public policy that relies on child allowances is the one that is truly profamily.

Welfare laws need to be revised, too. At present, in nearly every jurisdiction, welfare payments are cut off if a recipient marries a working person, thus discouraging marriage. Just as we have practically

eliminated most of the marriage penalty that used to exist in the US tax law (and the rest should be removed), marriage of those on welfare should be welcomed rather than penalised.

Also, others should follow those fourteen US states in which welfare agencies have changed their policies and are working to maintain families rather than simply ignoring them. The Family Preservation Program in New York City provides every two welfare families covered by the program with a caseworker who works with them as many as twenty hours a week. The caseworker arranges for homebased services such as parent training, job skills development, and homemaking. The cost is \$8,000 a year per family, compared to \$20,000 a year per child in foster care.<sup>77</sup>

More generally, Karl Zinsmeister, a writer on family affairs, points out:

Interventions must operate through and with parents, not around them. Day care programs, for instance, ought to require classroom participation by each parent on a rotating basis. Child counselling should include parents. Unless undertaken cautiously, well-intentioned public efforts to compensate for parental remoteness can have the inadvertent effect of apologizing for, and increasing, such remoteness.<sup>78</sup>

When all is said and done, if we wish to communicate that we care more about sustaining families than we did in the heyday of permissiveness, alternative life-styles experimentation, and anti-family ideology, we should make divorce less easy. This can be achieved without returning to the days when divorce was illegal, which led to all kinds of unwholesome social practices – from living with one person while being married to another to quickie divorces in other countries (a policy that discriminated against those who could not afford a trip to the Dominican Republic or Mexico).

Such changes in divorce law will not save all marriages; nothing could achieve such a goal, nor should it be attempted. But we should offer incentives that would make staying married and attending to

one's children more attractive. And we should go after parents who cease to pay for their children after divorce, both because it is their duty and to make divorce less lucrative. My main concern, though, is not with incentives or punishment, but with the need for a change of heart: people need to enter marriage more responsibly and be more committed to making it work.

# Marriage and the Childless Couple

So far the discussion has deliberately focused on parents' responsibility to children. People who have kids ought to strive to make their marriages work and should avoid divorce as often as possible. But what about couples that choose not to have children or whose children have left the nest? Mary Ann Mason, in her book *The Equality Trap*, confronts this issue head on.<sup>79</sup> She argues that we should have, in effect, two kinds of marriages, one for those with children (much more binding) and one for those without. As she sees it, childless marriages fall under the category of 'relationships,' and the emphasis in these should be on the freedom of the individual. Such relationships could be governed by a contract, provided it was written and carefully constructed.

Behind her idea is a libertarian concept of human nature. She sees adults as individuals who, in situations that do not affect children, are capable of 'playing their own game.' Social philosopher Michael Novak characterises this libertarian view of marriage:

The central idea of our foggy way of life, however, seems unambiguous enough. It is that it is solitary and brief, and that its aim is self-fulfilment. Next come beliefs in establishing the imperium of the self. Total mastery over one's surroundings, control over the disposition of one's time – these are necessary conditions for self-fulfilment. ... In such a vision of the self, marriage is merely an alliance.<sup>80</sup>

Sometimes a cultural theme is captured in a few lines, such as these from *Newsweek*: 'Stuck marriages often break up – or worse, don't. Many go on to become what Dr. William B. Phillips, an Atlanta family counsellor, calls the 'American Gold Watch Marriage' – short on excitement and fulfilment but long on security.'<sup>81</sup> The implied value judgement is stark: it puts excitement and fulfilment above security and continuity and the stability that it implies. One is entitled to make such a choice, but need we assume that it is automatically, across the board, the better of the two options? Many married people who are not devotees of pop psychology seem to feel otherwise, as their continued 'stuck' behaviour indicates.

In contrast with this idealization of the individual as an autonomous being, strong social science data show that people who are isolated and not involved in sustained relationships (of which marriage is the primary category) are more likely to be physically and mentally ill. The unmarried have higher mortality rates than the married (from all causes of death).<sup>82</sup> A study of more than 2,500 adults found that the mortality rate among isolated men was 3.87 times higher than that of men with a high level of social relations (marriage, contact with extended family, and so on). Women who had a low level of social integration had a mortality rate that was nearly twice as high as that of women with a high level of social integration.<sup>83</sup> In the UK, depending on their age, unmarried men have a 1.54–2.04 greater risk of mortality, while for women have a 1.27–1.64 times higher risk.<sup>84</sup> Four other similar studies found that socially isolated individuals had a mortality rate that was between 1.07 to 4.0 times that of highly social individuals.<sup>85</sup> The influence of social networks rivals such known physical factors as 'cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipids, and physical activity.'<sup>86</sup> Survivors of heart attacks who lived alone were nearly twice as likely to suffer a second attack within six months as those who lived with a companion.<sup>87</sup>

Married people do not simply live longer, stay healthier, and exact fewer community costs. A 1991 study by Lawrence A. Kurdek at Wright State University of more than 6,500 adults found that 'married persons reported greater happiness and less depression than persons

who were not currently married.’<sup>88</sup> Another study found that divorced women were more likely to abuse alcohol than were married women.<sup>89</sup>

The underlying reasons for these phenomena is that most people deeply need one another. They need bonding – not as much as children, who are only partially formed persons – but still a great deal. In isolation most people become unformed, if not unglued. And although people can have a variety of relationships, with friends and kin and pets, for most these are supplements to or inadequate substitutes for the stable and institutionalised bonds that marriage provides.

Sociologists Peter and Brigitte Berger explain:

Marriage is designed to provide a ‘haven’ of stable identity and meaning in a social situation where these are very scarce commodities. Here there is the norm of mutual concern for all aspects of the individual’s life. Further, it is here that two individuals are in a position to construct a ‘world of their own’, again something that is not easy to do elsewhere amid the complexities of modern life.<sup>90</sup>

The power of the marital bond comes into sharp relief when one spouse has a chronic or terminal illness. Under such circumstances the other spouse will usually stick by through thick and thin, providing love and care. There are numerous reports of husbands who visited their wives in nursing homes day in and day out for years; wives, too, have been known to patiently nurse their husbands after strokes and through long bouts with cancer and Alzheimer’s disease. In contrast, most friendships (there are, of course, exceptions) do not carry such a bond of mutual support. Friends, however well meaning, tend to visit less and less frequently, and the time and attention that they afford is rather limited compared with that of a spouse.

We should avoid here as elsewhere ‘the either/or’ curse. To suggest that most adults thrive on bonding is not to suggest that their individuality needs to be lost as they become immersed in a relationship. A person who becomes steeped in a relationship need not find, as women did in traditional families, that he or she is under pressure to



suppress his or her ambitions, even to become a family fixture – a wife and mother, but not a person in her own right. To suggest a higher valuation of being a couple (and a partner-parent) does not entail giving up a personal identity. Boundaries can be worked out that define the couple's (and family's) 'we' zone (for instance, shared meals) and the individuals' 'I' zones (my studies, your football game). Sustaining marriage requires only that the we-ness be significant and that conflicts between the 'I' zones of various family members (and between the 'I' zones and the 'we' zone) be worked out with an eye to maintaining the union. It does *not* entail suppressing the 'I' zone.

Because people outside lasting relationships are often damaged in every sense of the term, the moral voice of the community should repeat what our forefathers and -mothers knew a long time ago: people are born as halves and gravitate toward one another to find their completion. We do not mean to ostracise those who remain single and we can be less concerned and agitated about childless divorces than about those that involve children. But we poorly serve the community, and the many persons involved, if we fail to communicate that together is better for most people, most of the time.

# In Conclusion

Having a child is not merely a personal, private matter. It is an act that has significant consequences for the community. Hence those who bring children into the world have a social obligation to attend to their moral education. Children have no inborn moral values, and unless these values are introduced, they will not become civil members of the community. The best way to educate most infants (up to at least two years) is through bonding with their parents. Child care centres are a poor substitute. Therefore it is important that parents who have satisfied their elementary economic needs invest themselves in their children by spending less time on their careers and consumeristic pursuits and more time with their children. The community should enable parents to do this – by encouraging paid leave, flexitime, and other such measures – and express its support for such an ordering of priorities. This is not an indirect way of suggesting that mothers should stay home; both parents share the responsibility to attend to their children. The community should not stigmatise but appreciate those who do.

# Summary and Recommendations

As men and then women left to work outside the home, they were not adequately replaced. Their place was taken by some child-care services, a relatively small increase in baby-sitters and nannies, and some additional service by grandparents. But the overall effect was a sharp reduction in commitment and the quality of care. This parenting deficit has in turn contributed to long-term problems of anti-social behaviour, criminality and even mental illness.

Although parenting is the responsibility of both parents – and may well be discharged most effectively in two – parent families immersed in a community context of kin and neighbours – *most important is the scope of commitment*. Single parents may do better than two-career absentee parents. Children require a commitment of time, energy, and, above all, of self.

The childcare industry provides a low quality service. Most child-care centres are understaffed with poorly paid and underqualified personnel. Child care workers in both the USA and UK are in the lowest tenth of all wage earners (with an average salary of £5.13 in the UK in 1992). The personnel come and go, at a rate of 41% per year at an average US day care centre.

Ideally both parents need to be involved in parenting. Child care and education are highly labour-intensive, demanding tasks. Young children can soak up huge amounts of care, attention and love. But

above all successful parenting requires a different valuation of children as compared to other 'priorities', such as career and consumption.

This in turn requires a different attitude towards freedom and choice. Few who advocated equal rights for women favoured a society in which sexual equality would mean that all adults would act like men, who in the past were relatively inattentive to children. Yet this is what has happened.

In the same way what appeared to be progressive measures to ease divorce have often weakened womens' bargaining position, and encouraged a less responsible attitude towards relationships as well as harming children. Divorce and separation of parents is associated with depression and unsuccessful relationships in later life. Amongst adults there is substantial evidence that those who live outside family structures tend to have higher mortality and mental illness.

These are not arguments for a return to an outdated authoritarianism. But they do show that the freedoms won in recent decades carry a heavy cost, and that there is now a need to shift the balance back away from rights and freedoms towards a stronger sense of the responsibilities on which any stable community depends.

What can be done? We need to return more hands and, above all, more voices to the 'parenting industry'. Given the forbearance of trade unions and employers, it is possible for millions of parents *to work at home*. Computers, modems, up- and downlinks, satellites, need to be used much more extensively. If both parents must work outside the household, it is preferable if they can arrange to *work different shifts*, to increase the all-important parental presence. Some couples manage with *only one working full-time and the other part-time*. In some instances two parents can *share one job* and the parenting duties, or work *flexitime* to allow them to come in late or leave late (or make some other adjustments in their schedule) if the other parent is detained at work, a child is sick, and so on.

In childcare we should encourage cooperative arrangements that require each parent to contribute some time – perhaps four hours each week – to serve at his or her child's centre. Such arrangements reduce costs and allow parents to see firsthand what actually goes on, ensuring some measure of built in accountability. This provides for

continuity – while staff come and go, parents stay – and for social bonds with other parents.

Public policies could further sustain the family with more generous child allowances. Others suggest a program, modeled after the GI Bill in the US, that would give parents who stay at home ‘points’ toward future educational or retraining expenses. Statutory maternity and paternity rights need to be considerably improved. Firms should provide six months of paid leave and another year and a half (eighteen months) of unpaid leave, with the costs shared by the employers of the father and the mother.

We also need to limit the damaging effects of divorce. There is no magic pill that will make married people get along better but there are ways to encourage young people to enter marriage more responsibly, and sustain those marriage that are in place. To avoid the rush to divorce, we need to further slow the rush to marriage. We should insist that the prospective bride and groom first attend group counselling sessions and learn the secrets of joint decision making, mutual respect, budget making, and so on. At an earlier stage schools should offer more courses on human relations and better ways of resolving differences, primarily through role playing rather than through lectures. Studies show that about the same number of conflicts occur in ‘good’ and ‘bad’ marriages; the difference is that the partners in solid and relatively happy marriages have developed less bruising and more effective means of dealing with their differences.

Another way to proceed is to arrange for ‘precommitments’, which in effect would add to the existing marital vows. Couples who are about to marry or are already married could agree that if they reached a point where they considered divorce, they would delay their decision for two to three years; participate in marital counselling; and accept that the spouse seeking a divorce would make extra economic sacrifices. Laws may be changed to require a waiting period for couples who seek to get married to allow more time for second thoughts in times when impulses run high.

Another measure, would be in case of divorce to divide the family’s assets not between fathers and mothers, but three ways, with the third

part going to whoever is the custodial parent (typically the mother). The size of the third part would depend on the number and ages of the children.

We should also develop positive economic incentives, through taxes and benefits, to make it easier for families to dedicate themselves to children and to make parents, mainly fathers, less inclined to walk out.

The long-term goal must be to bring up children who are better able to form lasting relationships and participate actively in the life of their community.

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