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DO MOTHERS AND FATHERS MATTER?

The Social Science Evidence on Marriage and Child Well-Being

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Do children do best when they are raised by their own married mother and fathers, or are alternative family forms just as good at protecting children? An emerging bi-partisan consensus on marriage and child well-being is being challenged by research on gay and lesbian parenting, which some scholars and advocates say shows that children do just as well raised by unisex couples. How should policymakers and other elites evaluate these two competing bodies of evidence?

MARRIAGE AND CHILD WELL-BEING: THE EMERGING CONSENSUS

In the last thirty years, thousands of studies evaluating the consequences of marriage have been conducted in various disciplines (*e.g.*, psychology, sociology, economics, and medicine). Twelve leading family scholars recently summarized the research literature this way: “Marriage is an important social good associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike. . . . [W]hether American society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.”¹ Among their conclusions:

- Marriage increases the likelihood that children enjoy warm, close relationships with parents.
- Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.
- Children raised outside of intact married homes are more likely to divorce or become unwed parents themselves.
- Marriage reduces child poverty.

- Divorce increases the risk of school failure for children, and reduces the likelihood that they will graduate from college and achieve high status jobs.
- Children in intact married homes are healthier, on average, than children in other family forms.
- Babies born to married parents have sharply lower rates of infant mortality.
- Children from intact married homes have lower rates of substance abuse.
- Divorce increases rates of mental illness and distress in children, including the risk of suicide.
- Boys and young men from intact married homes are less likely to commit crimes.
- Married women are less likely to experience domestic violence than cohabiting and dating women.
- Children raised outside of intact marriages are more likely to be victims of both sexual and physical child abuse.

They conclude, “Marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, and high-conflict or violent marriages.”²

Recent analyses by mainstream child welfare organizations confirm this consensus on the social science evidence across ideological and partisan lines. For example:

- A *Child Trends* research brief summed up the scholarly consensus: “Research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the family structure that helps the most is a family headed by two-biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. Children in single-parent families, children born to unmarried mothers, and children in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships face higher risks of poor outcomes. . . . There is thus value for children in promoting strong, stable marriages between biological parents.”³
- An Urban Institute scholar concludes, “Even among the poor, material hardships were substantially lower among married couple families with children than among other families with children. . . . The marriage impacts were quite huge, generally higher than the effects of education. The impacts [of marriage] were particularly high among non-Hispanic black families.”⁴
- A Centers for Disease Control report notes, “Marriage is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, and dissolution of marriage is associated with negative outcomes for men, women, and their children.”⁵
- A Center for Law and Social Policy Brief concludes, “Research indicates that, on average, children who grow up in families with both their biological parents in a low-conflict marriage are better off in a number of ways than children who grow up in single-, step-, or cohabiting-parent households.”⁶

While scholars continue to disagree about the size of the marital advantage and the mechanisms by which it is conferred,⁷ the weight of social science evidence strongly supports the idea that family structure matters and that the family structure that is most protective of child well-being is the intact, biological, married family.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE OF GAY PARENTING: A COMPETING BODY OF EVIDENCE?

Most of the research on family structure, however, does not directly compare children in intact married homes with children raised from birth by same-sex couples. Thus the powerful new consensus on family structure is on a collision course with a separate emerging consensus from a related field: the social science literature on sexual orientation and parenting.

Judith Stacey summed up this new challenge to the social science consensus on family structure in testimony before the U.S. Senate this way:

The research shows that what places children at risk is not fatherlessness, but the absence of economic and social resources that a qualified second parent can provide, whether male or female. . . . Moreover, the research on children raised by lesbian and gay parents demonstrates that these children do as well if not better than children raised by heterosexual parents. Specifically, the research demonstrates that children of same-sex couples are as emotionally healthy and socially adjusted and at least as educationally and socially successful as children raised by heterosexual parents.⁸

Other researchers, including at least two prominent professional associations, have made similar claims.⁹ Advocates for same-sex marriage often rely on these studies to assert that scientific evidence shows that married mothers and fathers hold no advantages for children. As Mary Bonauto, counsel for the plaintiffs in the Massachusetts marriage litigation, wrote in the Summer 2003 edition of *Human Rights*, “[C]hild-rearing experts in the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association insist that the love and commitment of two parents is most critical for children—not the parents’ sex or sexual orientation.”¹⁰

Similarly Evan Wolfson, head of Freedom to Marry, asserted recently, “[T]here is no evidence to support the offensive proposition

that only one size of family must fit all. Most studies—including the ones that [Maggie] Gallagher relies on—reflect the common sense that what counts is not the family structure, but the quality of dedication, commitment, self-sacrifice, and love in the household.”¹¹

WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

How should legal thinkers and decision-makers evaluate such competing claims about family structure and child well-being both allegedly grounded in social science evidence?

Numerous reviews of the literature on sexual orientation and parenting have been conducted.¹² At least three such reviews have pointed to the serious scientific limitations of the social science literature on gay parenting.¹³

Perhaps the most thorough review was prepared by Steven Nock, a sociologist at the University of Virginia who was asked to review several hundred studies as an expert witness for the Attorney General of Canada. Nock concluded:

Through this analysis I draw my conclusions that 1) all of the articles I reviewed contained at least one fatal flaw of design or execution; and 2) not a single one of those studies was conducted according to general accepted standards of scientific research.¹⁴

Design flaws researchers have found in these studies include very basic limitations:

- a. **No nationally representative sample.** Even scholars enthusiastic about unisex parenting, such as Stacey and Biblarz, acknowledge that “there are no studies of child development based on random, representative samples of [same-sex couple] families.”¹⁵
- b. **Limited outcome measures.** Many of the outcomes measured by the research are

unrelated to standard measures of child well-being used by family sociologists (perhaps because most of the researchers are developmental psychologists, not sociologists).

- c. **Reliance on maternal reports.** Many studies rely on a mother’s report of her parenting skills and abilities, rather than objective measures of child outcomes.
- d. **No long-term studies.** All of the studies conducted to date focus on static or short-term measures of child development. Few or none follow children of unisex parents to adulthood.

But perhaps the most serious methodological critique of these studies, at least with reference to the family structure debate, is this:

The vast majority of these studies compare single lesbian mothers to single heterosexual mothers. As sociologist Charlotte Patterson, a leading researcher on gay and lesbian parenting, recently summed up, “[M]ost studies have compared children in divorced lesbian mother-headed families with children in divorced heterosexual mother-headed families.”¹⁶

Most of the gay parenting literature thus compares children in some fatherless families to children in other fatherless family forms. The results may be relevant for some legal policy debates (such as custody disputes) but, in our opinion, they are not designed to shed light on family structure per se, and cannot credibly be used to contradict the current weight of social science: family structure matters, and the family structure that is most protective a child well-being is the intact, married biological family.

Children do best when raised by their own married mother and father.

Endnotes

¹ William J. Doherty, et al., 2002. *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values): 6 (co-authors include William J. Doherty, William A. Galston, Norval D. Glenn, John Gottman, Barbara Markey, Howard J. Markman, Steven Nock, David Popenoe, Gloria G. Rodriguez, Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott M. Stanley, Linda J. Waite, and Judith Wallerstein).

² *Id.* at 18.

³ Kristin Anderson Moore, et al., 2002. "Marriage from a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children and What Can We Do About It?", *Child Trends Research Brief* (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends) (June): 1 (available at <http://www.childtrends.org/PDF/MarriageRB602.pdf>).

⁴ Robert I. Lerman, 2002. "Impacts of Marital Status and Parental Presence on the Material Hardship of Families with Children," *The Urban Institute* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute) (July): 27 (available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410538>).

⁵ Matthew D. Bramlett & William D. Mosher, 2001. "First Marriage Dissolution, Divorce, and Remarriage: United States," *CDC Advance Data* no. 323 (May 31): 1.

⁶ Mary Parke, 2003. "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being," *CLASP Policy Brief* no. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy) (May): 6. These are findings about the family structure debate in general. On the question of sexual orientation and parenting, the brief summarizes the social science this way: "Although the research on these families has limitations, the findings are consistent: children raised by same-sex parents are no more likely to exhibit poor outcomes than children raised by divorced heterosexual parents. Since many children raised by gay or lesbian parents have undergone the divorce of their parents, researchers have considered the most appropriate comparison group to be children of heterosexual divorced parents. Children of gay or lesbian parents do not look different from their counterparts raised in heterosexual divorced families regarding school performance, behavior problems, emotional problems, early pregnancy, or difficulties finding employment. However, as previously indicated, children of divorce are at higher risk for many of these problems than children of married parents." *Id.* at 5.

⁷ See, e.g., E. Mavis Heatherington & John Kelly, 2002. *For Better or For Worse—Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.).

⁸ *What is Needed to Defend the Bipartisan Defense of Marriage Act of 1996?: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights of the Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, 108th Cong., Sept. 4, 2003* (written statement of Prof. Judith Stacey, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, New York University).

⁹ In December 1999, Stanford University Law Professor Michael Wald released an analysis of Proposition 22, a proposed initiative statute which would define marriage as the union of one man and one woman under California law. Assessing the claim that "it is better for children to be raised by two opposite-sex married parents," the author points to social science research and concludes baldly, "[T]he evidence does not support these claims." Michael S. Wald, 1999. *Same-Sex Couples: Marriage, Families, and Children: An Analysis of Proposition 22, The Knight Initiative* (Stanford, The Stanford Institute for Research on Women and Gender & The Stanford Center on Adolescence): 11; see *id.* at vi ("Some opponents of same-sex couple marriage content that it is harmful for children to be raised by gay or lesbian parents. Again, there is a large body of research available to assess this claim.") (citing a statement from the American Psychological Association). In 1995, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued a statement indicating that, based upon the available scientific data, children raised by lesbian and gay parents are not "disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to the children of heterosexual parents." American Psychological Association, *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: A Resource for Psychologists* (1995) (available at www.apa.org/pi/parent.html). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a similar policy statement, concluding "that the weight of evidence gathered during several decades using diverse samples and methodologies is persuasive in demonstrating that there is no systematic difference between gay and nongay parents in emotional health, parenting skills, and attitudes towards parenting." American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002. "Coparent or Second-Parent Adoption by Same-Sex Parents," *Pediatrics* 109(2): 339-340 (February) (available at <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;109/2/339>).

¹⁰ Mary L. Bonauto, 2003. "Civil Marriage as a Locus of Civil Rights Struggles," *Human Rights* (Summer): 3, 7.

¹¹ Evan Wolfson, 2003. "Enough Marriage to Share: A Response to Maggie Gallagher," in Lynn Wardle, et al., eds., *Marriage and Same-Sex Unions: A Debate* (Westport, CT: Praeger): 25, 26-27.

¹² American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002. "Coparent or Second-Parent Adoption by Same-Sex Parents," *Pediatrics* 109(2) (February): 339-340 (available at <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;109/2/339>); Judith Stacey & Timothy Biblarz, 2001. "(How) Does The Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?," *Am. Sociological Rev.* 66: 159; C. Patterson, 2000. "Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men," *Journal of Marriage and Family*

62: 1052-1069; M. Kirkpatrick, 1997. "Clinical Implications of Lesbian Mother Studies," *Journal of Homosexuality* 14 (1/2): 201-211; American Psychological Association, 1995. *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: A Resource for Psychologists* (available at www.apa.org/pi/parent.html); C. Patterson, 1995. "Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers and Their Children," in A. R. D'Augelli & C. Patterson, *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities Across the Lifespan: Psychological Perspectives*: 262-290; C. Patterson, 1992. "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents," *Child Development* 63: 1025-1042; G.D. Green & F.W. Bozett, 1991. "Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers," in J.C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich eds., *Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy*; J.J. Bigner & F.W. Bozett, 1990. "Parenting by Gay Fathers," *Marriage and Family Review* 14 (3/4): 155-175; J.S. Gottman, "Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents," *Marriage and Family Review* 14 (3/4): 177-196; F.W. Bozett, 1989. "Gay fathers: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Homosexuality* 18 (1/2): 137-162; D. Cramer, 1986. "Gay Parents and Their Children: A Review of Research and Practical Implications," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 64: 504-507.

¹³ Diana Baumrind, 1995. "Commentary on Sexual Orientation: Research and Social Policy Implications," *Developmental Psychology* 31 (No. 1): 130; Affidavit of Stephen Lowell Nock, Halpern v. Attorney General of Canada, No. 684/00 (Ont. Sup. Ct. of Justice); Robert Lerner & Althea K. Nagai, 2001. *No Basis: What the Studies Don't Tell Us About Same-Sex Parenting* (Washington, D.C.: Marriage Law Project). In addition Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, 2001. "(How) Does The Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?," *American Sociological Review* 66: 159, while generally supportive of same-sex parenting, acknowledge important methodological limitations in existing research. For example the authors acknowledge that "there are no studies of child development based on random, representative samples of [same-sex couple headed] families."

¹⁴ Nock Aff. ¶ 3, Halpern v. Attorney General of Canada, No. 684/00 (Ont. Sup. Ct. of Justice) (copies available from the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy; joshua@imapp.org). In 1995, prominent Berkeley sociologist Diana Baumrind reviewed various parenting studies, including the work of Charlotte Patterson and David Flaks. Diana Baumrind, 1995. "Commentary on Sexual Orientation: Research and Social Policy Implications," *Developmental Psychology* 31(1): 130. In her review, Professor Baumrind evaluated, among other things, the claim that children of homosexual parents suffered no adverse outcomes, and were no more likely to develop a homosexual sexual orientation than were children not raised in such homes. Problems Baumrind found with the research she reviewed included the use of small, self-selected convenience samples, reliance on self-report instruments, and biased study populations consisting of disproportionately privileged, educated, and well-off parents. Due to these flaws, Baumrind questioned the conclusions on both "theoretical and empirical grounds." *Id.* at 133-134. Another review, prepared by Robert Lerner and Althea Nagai in 2001, looked at 49 separate parenting studies before concluding that "the methods used in these studies are so flawed that the studies prove nothing." Robert Lerner & Althea K. Nagai, 2001. *No Basis: What the Studies Don't Tell Us About Same-Sex Parenting* (Washington, D.C.: Marriage Law Project): 6.

¹⁵ Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, 2001. "(How) Does The Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?," *American Sociological Review* 66:159, 166.

¹⁶ Charlotte J. Patterson et al., 2000. "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents: Research, Law and Policy," in Bette L. Bottoms et al., eds., *Children and the Law: Social Science and Policy* 10-11 (available from lead author at cjp@virginia.edu); see also Charlotte J. Patterson, 2000. "Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62: 1052-1069.