



Them Before Us: Putting Children First

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Introduction

How can we create a world in which children thrive?

Many of us dream about our ideal family, and what that family looks like. Some of us are fortunate enough to have a family that matches our ideal. Others of us, less so for a variety of reasons related to tragedy or circumstances beyond our control. We carry these wounds with us, and they cut the deepest not least because our family is where we are known and loved and free to be who we really are. Our family is our safe haven—a place where we learn to feel secure and receive the love, support, and encouragement we need to face the world.

Navigating a discussion about the ideal environment for raising children is therefore fraught with challenge, as any discussion about family structure invariably resurrects these wounds. Particularly, because reality does not always match the ideal, and many of us did not enjoy the family structure for which we longed. This paper therefore is not intended to pass judgment. Its chief aim is to explain the optimal circumstances in which children can grow up secure in their identity and ready to share their contributions with the world, so that parents and policymakers can make decisions in the best interests of children. If we can understand the optimal, it gives society something to aim at, even if we fall short. Moving the goal posts to something less than this ensures we achieve the suboptimal.

So often in our world today, policymakers focus on the priorities of lobby groups and campaigners and do not pause to reflect on the rights, well-being, and interests of children. The cultural, economic, and legal preferences of adults often overshadow policy choices that would enable children to receive what they need most: the love of their parents, and the confidence and security that comes from knowing their parents love each other.

Why do children carry this longing in their hearts?

We intuitively understand the universal longing children have for their parents. That is why, for example, searching for one's missing father is a repeated theme in art—from ancient sagas, to blockbuster movies, to rap lyrics. But what is at the heart of this quest?

As children, we come into the world asking an existential question: "Who am I?" Our families teach us the answer to this question and reassure us that we belong. This paper examines the family structure in which children have the best outcomes, feel secure in their identity, and can truly thrive as responsible members of society.

Current Context

The right of children to family life is a foundational right. International law gives a primary place to the rights of children by recognising that the family is “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children,” and that children require particular care and attention as they develop.¹

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (“UNCRC”), the most universally accepted human rights treaty in history, provides a more specific explanation of the kind of “particular care and attention” children deserve. The UNCRC states children have a “right to know and be cared for” by “both parents.”^{2,3} Further, children should never be separated from either parent against their will.⁴ The Convention states in its preamble that, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, the expounded rights are considered to be part of the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”⁵ This means they are not granted by the document or by governments but are inherent to the dignity of each human person, and in this case, each human child.⁶

Reading these legal principles alongside data over the last 50 or so years reveals the heart of the problem. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has tracked parental separation across different studies, over several decades, and it has found a precipitous fall in the number of children still living with both parents into adulthood:

“An illustration of the growth in parental separation per se comes from a comparison of data from three of the British birth cohort studies. Amongst children born in 1958 included in the National Child Development Study (NCDS), 9% had experienced parental separation by age 16; amongst children born 12 years later in 1970 included in the Birth Cohort 70 Study (BCS70), 21% of children had experienced their parents’ separation by this age; and amongst children born in 2001–02 included in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), 43% were not living in a household with both their natural parents at age 17.”⁷

Even if the rate of decline has halved in the last 20 years, children born today are now unlikely to spend their whole childhood living with both parents—though we need to see what happens over the next decade to understand if that is certain. It is evident from the study that the decline in children living with both parents has simply continued at the same pace since 2001, as in the 50 preceding years, meaning that slightly over one in three children born today will reach adulthood living with both parents and, within the next generation, that ratio will sink to just one in five.⁸

Despite the UNCRC’s assurances that children have “the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”⁹, the evidence from the last several decades suggests the reality may not match the ideal. On the surface, it could be easy to brush off these findings on the basis that the children are all right and it is better for children to live with separated parents than to grow up in an unhappy home. While that may be true in some cases, it is important to dig deeper into this data to understand how the natural family—children raised by their married mother and father—shape children and help them answer their most existential questions about identity and belonging.

Family Structure

Identity

It is very difficult to answer the question “who am I?” if children cannot answer the question “whose am I?” Article 7 of the UNCRC recognises the fundamental need of children to know who their *biological* parents are. Many of us might disagree with this premise—as long as children are raised by two loving parents, they will have a great start in life.¹⁰ It is true that adoptive parents can raise resilient children and play an important role in supporting and shaping their children. But why does biology matter?

The evidence offers several insights from which we can glean certain principles.

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson posited that without “an unbroken genetic and historical attachment to the past, present, and future,” children suffered what he coined an “identity crisis”. This phenomenon was first observed *en masse* during the “baby scoop era”, a period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s in the United States characterised by increased adoption rates. Psychologists observed many “scooped” children suffered identity struggles.¹¹

The nature of these struggles is articulated in the findings of an American Adoption Congress Survey,¹² which examined data from several countries showing that biology matters to adopted children:

- 72% of adoptees wanted to know why they were given up for adoption.
- 65% expressed a desire to meet their birth parents.
- 94% expressed the desire to know which birth parent they resemble most.

Children who were conceived using a third-party’s sperm or egg report similar “genealogical bewilderment”,¹³ describing their inner life as hollow and carrying a deep-seated feeling that they do not fit in, or a feeling of “otherness”. The results from a survey conducted in 2019 reveal that a profound number of these children are struggling with their identity:

- 64% of donor-conceived adults agreed with the statement: “My donor is half of who I am.”
- 78% agreed being donor-conceived was a significant part of their identity.
- 81% often wondered what personality traits, skills, and/or physical similarities they shared with their donor.¹⁴

From this evidence, we glean the fundamental need of children to access their biological roots to be secure in their identity, which is why a child’s own biological mother and father are so vitally important. Even when being raised by them is not possible, adoptive parents are encouraged to celebrate their child’s birth culture or country, talk about adoption and birth parents early and often, keep photos and letters from the child’s first family visible, and speak about the child’s birth family in positive terms as a means of anchoring their biological identity. In contrast, the reproductive technology industry often favours anonymous donors, so the child has no knowledge of or contact with at least one of their biological parents. The result is that children are intentionally subjected to identity struggles.

The quest for identity has led to change in adoption practices as well. In contrast to the nearly universal practice of closed adoption (in which children have no identifying information about or contact with their first family) during the baby scoop era, 95% of adoptions in the United States today have some degree of “openness”—that is, knowledge of or connection with their first family.

For children to flourish, whenever possible, the adults responsible for *creating them* must also accept the responsibility of *raising them*. Because, from the child's perspective, no other adult is biologically capable of telling them who they are.

Love and Safety

Being raised by one's biological parents carries other benefits as well. Children *do* need safety and love, and the two adults most likely to provide both are their own mother and father.

Empirical evidence suggests that in most, though not all cases, unrelated adults are less protective of, invested in, and connected to children, leading to the phrase researchers have coined as the "Cinderella Effect".¹⁵ Some data suggests that children are at heightened risk of physical abuse and neglect when they live with a stepfather, as opposed to their biological father.¹⁶ According to one study, children were 120 times more likely to be beaten to death by their stepfather (or their mother's live-in boyfriend) than their biological father.¹⁷

Equally concerning is research that shows stepparents do not feel as obligated to their stepchildren as they do their own offspring.¹⁸ Two Princeton economists found that stepmothers provided their stepchildren with less healthcare, less access to quality education, and that step-mothers spent fewer dollars on food for step-children than their own biological children.¹⁹

We draw on this evidence not to paint all stepparents with the same brush—indeed, there are many stepparents who provide their stepchildren with the love, support, and resources they need to live meaningful, healthy lives. But we do highlight these studies to explain, in part, why biological parents are important for children's upbringing. Even though biological parents may also be capable of inflicting these harms on their own children, the evidence suggests that the risk of such harm increases when children live with non-biological parents.

Most importantly, children need to grow up in loving, stable homes and in an environment where they can safely explore the answers to questions related to identity and belonging. The evidence points to that environment being realised when a child's right to be raised by their mother and father is respected.

Childhood Development

Children learn different things from both of their parents—mothers and fathers have unique attributes that are vital to childhood development. Psychoanalyst Erica Komisar puts it this way: "Mothers have traditionally been critical for attachment and emotional security, a base from which a child feels secure enough to explore the world. Fathers have traditionally helped children to separate from their mothers, to play, and to experiment and explore."²⁰ Children learn these qualities from both parents. That is not to say those who were raised in homes without one or both biological parents cannot learn these qualities—indeed, they can through role models, extended family members, and other influential people in their lives. However, children are disadvantaged when they are not surrounded by both maternal and paternal love in their home every day.

How do mothers and fathers make these unique contributions? From a biological perspective, the data is fascinating. Due to her higher oxytocin levels, increased during childbirth and breastfeeding, the mother is the natural nurturer and emotional regulator of a child whose ability to self-soothe will not fully operate until age three.²¹ A mother naturally tends to be more focused on her children's immediate emotional well-being.²² She is more sensitive to her child's pain, and more responsive to her infant's

needs. A father's higher levels of vasopressin connects him to the baby as well through his protective instincts. His protectiveness, coupled with his increased physicality and adventurousness, encourages resilience and healthy risk-taking in children.²³

There are, of course, exceptions, but overall, because of their brain and bodily differences, mothers tend to *care for* while fathers tend to *play with* children.²⁴ When mothers do play, they tend to connect more on the child's level, encouraging sharing and fairness. When the father is in the mix, the play is competitive, more exciting, and pushes boundaries.²⁵ *Playing with* children leads fathers to emphasise the development of children's gross motor skills. Just like in the world's wide-open spaces, children need to develop the ability to move in their environment. Fathers facilitate learning through rough-and-tumble play by throwing the football, racing to the mailbox, and raking the leaves.²⁶ Mothers? *Caring for* their children develops fine motor skills through play in the confined spaces of the home, such as slicing bananas with a butter knife, cutting out shapes, tying shoes, and colouring.²⁷ When it comes to children learning to use their bodies, the world and the home unite their complementary styles which maximises development.

Generally speaking, men and women also approach discipline differently.²⁸ There are innate differences between men and women, and, in the family, those differences have a profound and positive impact on children. While parenting styles may follow as many patterns as there are people in this world, women and men typically adopt different approaches.

For instance, a mother tends to approach the world through a relational lens, which is why she is inclined to show grace when a chore goes undone because there was a "good" reason. But the father knows the world will not care about excuses for failing to complete a job, and he often parents his children with a "hard knocks" approach, teaching his children through consequences. He knows the unforgiving nature of the world and that sometimes you just have to do what you are told in order to keep your family-supporting job or sustain your marriage. That is why, for example, failure to take out the rubbish is often met by mothers with, "Honey, I know you're doing homework, but I asked you to take the bins out this morning." But fathers are more likely to meet a take-the-bins-out failure with, "Rubbish. Now."

Although most couples will deviate from these norms in some way and at various times, differences in parenting styles are grounded in empirical, and anecdotal, evidence. A number of studies have concluded that women living in the most egalitarian societies, who enjoy the greatest educational and economic freedoms, were the most stereotypically "female" in their parenting approaches.^{29,30}

Complementarity and Relatability

Mothers and fathers teach children about their own identity and how to relate to the opposite sex.³¹ While other role models teach children how to navigate these differences, parents play an important role in forming their children because "the family" is the primary staging ground for self-understanding and learning to interact with the outside world. Children can—and will—learn from others outside the home, but parents bear primary responsibility for teaching their children to see themselves, and others, rightly.

Children learn to be secure in who they are with the love and guidance of their parents. Often, girls look to their mothers as examples of what womanhood looks like, while boys look to their fathers as models of manhood. Children learn to interact with the opposite sex through their interactions with their opposite-sex parent. For instance, the mother-son dynamic prepares a boy to live in a world where he will interact with women in his community, classroom, and workplace. What better way to train men to be sensitive to the needs of women in their lives than to have engaged mothers guiding and shaping

boys from birth to graduation, and beyond? The father-daughter relationship allows the daughter to observe gender differences, and practice interaction with men, in a protective and caring dynamic.

The way parents treat each other also teaches children how to interact with others. Ideally, children witness their father cherish, adore, respect, and protect their mother, and both boys and girls will emerge from adolescence knowing these attributes represent true masculinity.³²

Beyond the ways that a male and female parent maximise their development and sense of identity, mothers and fathers also furnish children with something that they crave—maternal and paternal love. Children do not just need to be loved in the abstract. They hunger for male and female love specifically, as the following testimonies illustrate:

“The absence of my father in my life has led to so many awful things in my life. I constantly felt unloved, unworthy and abandoned. I craved a father figure and protection. This led [sic] to me seeking out unhealthy and abusive relationships with men who simply didn’t care about me.”³³—Maggie.

“Making myself “open” to male presence out of unconscious desperation for male presence, sometimes meant being exposed to men who took advantage of me in a “predatory” way and/or began “grooming” me. Some just saw an easy target for torture. I took other boys’ rough-housing more personally than I should have, because my mother never rough-housed in a sane way. She would actually strike us if we played too rough and say “you don’t hit girls!” Because we never had a father to teach the “balance” of such play, I had no “off switch” when it came to rough-housing.”³⁴—Corbin.

“My formative years were almost entirely devoid of women. I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as a mother until I watched *The Land Before Time* at school. My five-year-old brain could not understand why I didn’t have the mom that I suddenly desperately wanted. I felt the loss. I felt the hole. As I grew, I tried to fill that hole with aunts, my dad’s lesbian friends, and teachers. I remember asking my first-grade teacher if I could call her Mom. I asked that question of any woman who showed me any amount of love and affection. It was instinctive. I craved a mother’s love even though I was well loved by my two gay dads.”³⁵—Samantha.

Health and Wellbeing

Children thrive in stable families. While parents may choose to live apart—through separation—or one parent may pass away, children are not responsible for these tragic circumstances. The most common form of parental loss children experience is fatherlessness. The impact of fatherlessness is, however, profound. Consider the following statistics:

- 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.³⁶
- 85% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes.³⁷
- Fatherless females are four times more likely to become pregnant as teenagers.³⁸
- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes.³⁹
- 85% of children who exhibit behavioural disorders come from fatherless homes.⁴⁰
- 90% of adolescent repeat arsonists live with only their mother.⁴¹
- 71% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes.⁴²
- 75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centres come from fatherless homes.⁴³

- 70% of juveniles in state operated institutions have no father.⁴⁴

These statistics point to a deeper tragedy: what is the connection between fatherless homes and this behaviour? On some level, one difficult but plausible explanation is that these children did not know the love of their fathers or grow up in stable families where they felt safe and secure. They instead, in part, may have channelled this anger, frustration, and hurt into harmful, criminal, or unproductive behaviour in their quest to find the answer to their heart's deepest longing.

Physical Health

Parental separation also affects children's physical and mental health and academic performance. This paper draws out this evidence to show the impact of family instability on children in an effort to equip parents with the information they need to love and support their children well and for policymakers to choose policy options that support families.

Fatherlessness affects children's physical health. For instance, children who have suffered the loss of their fathers—either through death, separation, or divorce—have shorter telomeres—the protective end caps of the chromosomes believed to directly affect longevity.⁴⁵ Boys were especially affected, with a 40% greater impact on telomere length than girls. Similarly, girls who grow up without their biological fathers begin to menstruate a year earlier than their peers who live with their biological fathers.⁴⁶ Premature development can negatively affect long-term female health, and can lead to mood disorders, substance abuse, and a variety of reproductive cancers. Children born into homes with cohabiting parents are more likely to have low birth weight, and, by age five, more often experience asthma, obesity, and poor health.^{47,48}

Mental Health

Family structure can also affect children's mental health. One British study found that among 14-year-olds, 20% who experienced mental health challenges came from homes with married parents, 27% from among cohabiting parents, 32% from divorced parents, and 38% among separated cohabiting parents. The survey revealed that “not having a father in the house remains the number one predictor of teenage mental health problems in the UK.”^{49,50} Young women whose parents are divorced (which reduces contact with one or both parents) also report more depression, loneliness, childhood trauma, attachment anxiety, avoidance, and chronic stress.⁵¹ According to another study, 89% of children admitted to a pre-adolescent mental health unit had some kind of disruption in their family structure—that is, they were missing one or more of their three “social/emotional staples” from their father's love, mother's love, or familial stability.⁵²

Academic Performance

Children's academic performance is also connected to family structure. Again, while the relationship between the two is not determinative, it is indicative of broader challenges children face when their family stability is ruptured.

In the United States, data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth documents that 85% of children from families with married parents graduate high school, but this figure falls to 67% of children from single-parent families, 65% of children with stepparents, and 51% of children who live with neither parent.⁵³ British researchers found that 65% of students reported that their divorced parents negatively

impacted their standardised General Certificate of Secondary Education (“GCSE”) test results, and 44% believed their grades had suffered because of their families’ breakup.⁵⁴

At a time when rates of fatherlessness and parental separation continue to grow,⁵⁵ the effects of fatherlessness on children’s health and wellbeing show the vital importance of fathers in their children’s lives. Yet, when we read these statistics, it is important to remember that while demographics drive national destiny, they do not determine individual destiny. Each statistic is a person, and each person has the capacity to overcome life’s greatest challenges. It is not the case that all children in these circumstances are consigned to diminished outcomes. But if we want to set up each child to thrive, and thus for our society to thrive, we must recognise that both parents matter to their children and play essential roles in raising them.

Marriage

It is clear that children thrive when they know the love of their mother and father and grow up in stable, supportive homes. Throughout history, cultures have encouraged this environment through the institution of marriage, which creates stability for children to discover who they are and ensures children have access to the love of both of their parents. This paper is not the place to discuss the merits of other familial arrangements. It is the place to explain why marriage helps provide children with the stability they need to develop and thrive.

Marriage has been and continues to be the most child-friendly institution the world has ever known. Far from simply being a means of validating adult emotion and connection, three “norms” characterise marriage which have attending child-specific benefits: monogamy, complementarity, and permanence.⁵⁶

- **Monogamy:** etymologically, the word means “married to one”. The monogamous union of a child’s own parents means there will be no other adults in a romantic or cohabiting relationship with either of the parents. It is exclusive, “forsaking all other,” as found in traditional Christian marriage vows.⁵⁷ This limits the presence of unrelated adults sharing living spaces with the child, and thus eliminates the greatest threat of abuse and neglect. Monogamy maximises the *safety* of a child’s home.
- **Complementarity:** grants children the two halves of humanity which “complement” one another as they raise the child together. Complementarity maximises child *development* in the home.
- **Permanence:** marriage is a life-long union, “till death us do part.”⁵⁸ Permanence benefits children because they do not just need the love of their mother and the love of their father for two months, two years, or twelve years. Marriage enables children to remain connected to both parents for life, which is most likely to happen when children’s parents are connected to each other for life. Permanence maximises the *stability* in a child’s home.

There are many reasons for family breakdown. Perhaps one parent takes responsibility for their children while the other refuses to help. Some marriages end due to one parent’s dangerous or reckless behaviour. Sometimes an accident or disease takes a parent too soon. These are tragedies that many children experience and mourn.

Regardless of these tragic circumstances, children have a fundamental longing to be loved by both of their parents. The fulfilment of this longing is vital for raising healthy, resilient children. Children who

grow up in other familial arrangements can also attain similar outcomes, but they will face unique challenges as borne out by the evidence. Sadly, the need for children to know and be loved by both parents is often unmet.⁵⁹

The Ideal Versus the Reality

Children experience parental loss for a variety of reasons, sometimes due to the intentional choices of their parents, other times due to tragic parental losses through death. But culturally, there is something bigger happening than the choices of individual parents. Our culture, laws, and technology have contributed to an environment where it is far easier to prioritise parental preferences over children's best interests. It is all too easy now to view children as accessories to adult relationships, as *objects* of rights as opposed to *subjects* of rights.

Culturally, many couples are now opting for cohabitation, and the social importance of marriage has been reduced to "just a piece of paper". Among those aged 18 to 24, cohabitation is now more prevalent than living with a spouse: 9% of adults in this age category live with an unmarried partner. In 2018, the US Census Bureau found that 15% of young adults aged between 25 and 34 live with an unmarried partner. Yet, fifty years ago, in 1968, living with an unmarried partner was rare. Only 0.1% of those aged between 18 and 24, and 0.2% of those aged 25 to 34, lived with an unmarried partner, according to the Current Population Survey.⁶⁰

Our culture also views marriage with scepticism, which has contributed to the decline of marriage. In part, this suspicion stems from the fear that a celebration of marriage is synonymous with a return to the "1950s ideal housewife" and a culture that failed to accord women equal rights. Many cultural commentators denounce marriage as a tool of the patriarchy and present it as "dangerous" to women and a "trap".⁶¹ Although advocates for women's rights made important gains for equality between women and men, our culture should not erase the distinct and beautiful differences between women and men. Both bring unique contributions to bear in family life, the workplace, and in their communities.

Cultural messaging and entertainment have reinforced unhelpful stereotypes of fathers and marriage. For decades, Hollywood elites have depicted fathers as bumbling and inept—from Ray Romano, to Tim Allen, to Homer Simpson—saturating culture in the message that men are useless members of the traditional household and therefore unimportant to the rearing of children.⁶² Fictional characters such as Murphy Brown introduced the glamorisation of single motherhood to society. Celebrity single mothers by choice such as Sandra Bullock, Charlize Theron, and Rebel Wilson have sent the message that fathers are optional. The celebration of several gay icons who have created children via surrogacy, such as Anderson Cooper, Andy Cohen, Elton John, and Neil Patrick Harris, has begun to diminish the importance of mothers in a child's upbringing as well.

Taken together, the popular narrative in culture seems to be saying that children can thrive absent of their mother or father. However, as the evidence in this paper has revealed, children deserve to grow up in an environment where they find the answers to their identity—and fulfil their need for belonging—through knowing and being loved by their biological parents whenever possible.

Legally, our laws have shifted away from supporting the institution of marriage to accommodating a variety of relationships that seemingly prioritise the preferences of adults over the needs of children.⁶³ Over time, laws have dismantled marriage norm by norm—not least through no-fault divorce which has destroyed the expectation of *permanence*. As discussed above, each of these norms enshrine a distinct adult responsibility with an attending child-specific benefit. The legal undoing of these norms

transforms marriage from the most child-friendly institution the world has ever known to just another vehicle for adult fulfilment.

Legislatures are taking steps, rightly or wrongly, to adapt parentage laws to accommodate adult relationships beyond the basis of biology and adoption. For instance, the Uniform Parentage Act, promoted and adopted by several American states, expands the legal concept of parenthood by extending parental rights to “de facto” parents who are not biologically related to the child and without undergoing the adoption screening process.⁶⁴ Several European countries have made similar moves, granting parentage to unrelated adults, and then insisting that those adults be recognised across the European Union via a “Certificate of Parenthood”. Legislatures enact these changes under the guise of “children’s rights”,⁶⁵ but it is difficult to see how these changes support the needs of children to know their biological parents.

Technologically, in our quest to bring the gift of children to parents unable to conceive their own children naturally, we also run the risk of these reproductive interventions commodifying children and violating their right to be known and loved by both biological parents. In Vitro Fertilisation (“IVF”) created the first baby in a laboratory in 1978, and it is now responsible for about 2% of births annually in the United States and Europe. Put differently, for the first time in the history of our species, we can now have sex without babies and babies without sex.

In principle, IVF carries no ethical or moral risks if one embryo is implanted at a time, and the biological connection to both parents is maintained. But lately, more worrying trends have emerged. Increasingly, third-party sperm or egg donation is used to create IVF babies. The use of third parties in the reproduction process—someone else’s sperm, egg, and womb—severs the connection between parent and child at the moment of conception, leading to the genealogical bewilderment described at the beginning of this paper.⁶⁶

The Solution

If we are to strive for the ideal and create conditions for flourishing, we must wield the levers of culture, law, and technology to tell a renewed story about children, who they are, and what they need. The state alone cannot solve this challenge, though it has an important role to play in promoting lasting marriages and encouraging biological parents to raise their children together.

The principle of subsidiarity—that nothing should be done by a larger body or organisation that can be done at a smaller, more local level—finds its ultimate, nearly archetypal, expression in the parent-child relationship. Social bonds cannot be reduced to smaller units than mother/father and parent/child. And it is at this level where social flourishing has its genesis.

The Role of the State

In some places, a growing reliance on the state has weakened the natural family unit. State intervention necessarily carries benefits and unintended consequences. On the one hand, social welfare support can help families living in poverty and especially help single-parent families. On the other hand, this support can diminish the responsibility men feel towards their families and reduce their resolve to provide for their families, even in instances of parental separation. These unintended consequences can contribute to family breakdown and should not provide an avenue for parents to avoid responsibility for their children. For example, in America, state provisions designed to support single parent households and

their children have, in many cases, grown to offer a replacement to fatherhood in financial terms. This shift has been particularly discernible among ethnic minorities.⁶⁷ Yet, state intervention reshaping familial structures represents a clear overstep of its role in society. Furthermore, the contribution of a father is mental, emotional, developmental, and relational—far greater than any financial support the state can provide.

Consider, for instance, the correlation between single mothers and dependence on social benefits. A study on “The Effects of Benefits on Single Motherhood in Europe” found a “high correlation between the level of benefits and the incidence of single mothers. Benefits were very low both in 1994 and in 2001 in Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, countries with very low prevalence of single mothers. The United Kingdom is both the country with the highest incidence of single motherhood and one of the highest in terms of benefit levels in 2001.”⁶⁸ The study also found that “a country with yearly benefits 1,000 euros above the mean has about 17% more single mothers than a country with an average level of benefits, while the incidence of single heads is about 15% higher.”⁶⁹ The data shows a clear correlation between welfare benefits and single motherhood, even though correlation does not necessarily denote causation.

The tax systems of some countries also do not encourage marriage. In the United States, for example, the American Enterprise Institute’s “Marriage, Penalized” study found that couples effectively face a financial “marriage penalty” if they decide to marry. The study says: “Our analysis of American couples whose oldest child is two years or younger indicates that 82% of those in the second and third quintiles of family income (\$24,000 to \$79,000) face this kind of marriage penalty when it comes to Medicaid, cash welfare, or food stamps.”⁷⁰ That is, if the single mother marries their child’s father, the benefits system is structured in a way to make them poorer.

Although tax and social welfare systems can be structured to encourage family formation, the state cannot meet the most existential needs of children: to be loved by their parents and to know who they are. Policy will be useful only to the extent that it encourages and facilitates adults taking personal responsibility for the children in their own lives.

Reaching the Ideal Burdens Adults

Parents—those closest to children—bear primary responsibility for meeting their needs. Many parents take responsibility for their children and do everything in their power to give their children the best start in life. That being said, sometimes adults encounter obstacles to creating and accepting responsibility for their children.

Married couples and single parents face challenges unique to their situation. Married couples, at some point in their marriage, may struggle to maintain their union and may see divorce as an escape from what are often significant relational burdens. Choosing divorce results in split homes and split lives that diminish children’s physical, emotional, mental, and relational health for a lifetime.^{71,72} Although there may be reasons for couples to live apart, couples should be given all the information to consider this decision carefully and to consider the very real impact such a decision would have on their children.

Several people find themselves in a state of unwanted singleness. Solo parenting comes with unique challenges for parent and child. Single parents are remarkably resilient people, often performing the roles of two caregivers and working hard to provide financial and emotional support to their children, as their children do suffer from the absence of one of their parents. However, choosing intentional solo parenting subjects children to the diminished outcomes that lone parenting inherently delivers. Children from single parent homes are more than twice as likely to be arrested for a juvenile crime, are twice as

likely to receive treatment for behavioural and emotional problems, are approximately twice as likely to be expelled or suspended from school, are one-third more likely to drop out of high school, and are 50% more likely to experience poverty.⁷³ Aware of this data, parents and policymakers must come together to find ways to support these children better. Our broader culture needs to change its current indifference to family structure, if as a society we wish to commit to care for children and seek their wellbeing. Our beliefs regarding adult autonomy in family formation should be challenged when we encounter such evidence outlining its true impact on our children—and this process is one in which policymakers, media, communities, families, and individuals each have a subsidiary role.

In making the case for the ideal, this paper does not disregard the tragic situations of life which make the attainment of this ideal incredibly challenging. We can and must extend empathy and compassion to those who find themselves in alternative family arrangements. At the same time, the social science evidence reveals the importance of the natural family. Collectively, society should support the natural family even while it makes provision for other family arrangements. Imagine the transformative effect if policymakers put the needs of children first, and individuals took personal responsibility for prioritising the wellbeing of children. If the burden of family hardship is difficult for parents to bear, it is far harder for young children. Our society should protect and defend children, not leave them to carry the weight of our decisions.

Support for Families

Given the prevailing narratives about children and family in our culture, laws, and technology, a holistic remedy must include efforts to reorient culture, law, and technology towards the needs of children. As John M. Calkin wrote, “You become what you behold.”⁷⁴

What we behold shapes who we become, for better or for worse. Children are impressionable and easily influenced by those around them. This can be to their benefit, or to their harm. Tragically, the debut of *13 Reasons Why*, a television drama which chronicled the events leading up to one teenager’s suicide, correlated with a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among American youth aged 10 to 17.⁷⁵ Impressing and copying peers can also cause children to emulate dangerous behaviours, with reports arising every few months that a number of children, who consumed many hours of TikTok videos, have passed away while attempting to re-enact a TikTok challenge.⁷⁶ As a society, we need to take responsibility for what we are showing our children. Popular culture also shapes relational and familial norms, with depictions of irresponsible fathers in sitcoms tracking with the rise of out-of-wedlock births, and the rising exaltation of a single lifestyle and sexual freedom quite possibly both driving and reflecting current social fragmentation.⁷⁷ Again, our impressionability extends to the interpersonal level, as adults who *behold* friends divorcing are more likely to *become* divorcees.⁷⁸

Nowhere is the power of beholding stronger than in the home, and at no time is that power stronger than during a child’s development. Children tend to replicate what they see in their homes, whether it is their parents’ eating habits, religiosity, or their family structure. Evidence suggests that children’s experiences shape their futures. Children whose parents divorce are more likely to divorce,⁷⁹ children of single mothers are more likely to become teenage mothers (who are more likely to be unmarried),⁸⁰ and children created via sperm or egg donation are more likely to donate their sperm or eggs.⁸¹ Likewise, children from stable nuclear families are more likely to marry and remain married.⁸²

We cite this data not to pass judgment but to demonstrate that children learn from their parents. The most powerful way to *become* a responsible adult is to *behold* your own mother and father being responsible adults. But fewer and fewer children have that real-life example. In the United Kingdom in

2021, the number of children born to unmarried parents exceeded those of married parents for the first time.⁸³ Births out of wedlock are also the majority for 11 European countries.⁸⁴ In the United States, the out-of-wedlock birth rate was around 40% in 2018.⁸⁵ These children will not necessarily *behold* a picture of both their mother and father united together, accepting responsibility on their behalf in their own home. Yet they still need powerful, beautiful depictions of who they can and should *become* as adults.

Humans are mimetic creatures. Thus, it is essential that art, media, and literature adopt a positive, culture-shaping mission. The West needs to *behold* more images and stories of healthy marriages, more sitcoms of parents who work through relationship challenges, more stories in which adults sacrifice what they desire so that children can receive what they need. Great art and media can help restore the goodness of mothers, fathers, and marriage to our cultural imagination.

Parents should allow the world to *behold* their lives by faithfully living out the principles of putting their children's needs first in day-to-day life. Fathers should demonstrate a connected and engaged—rather than detached and disinterested—relationship with their children. Women should model motherhood as a joyful enterprise rather than a dreary one, worth sacrifices such as taking time away from work. By supporting one another through difficult situations such as unemployment, a miscarriage, or illness, ordinary parents can play an essential role in building a culture where responsible parenthood is the norm.

Social media is also a powerful tool in shaping culture. It can be used by couples to celebrate important milestones and showcase the life of responsibility they have chosen to create together. For example, honouring a spouse's birthday and celebrating how important he or she is; or highlighting sacrificial choices—giving time over things, coaching little league over playing video games, having breakfast with a child versus late night drinks with friends. Parents should publicly champion the activities they are engaging in which enable their families to thrive.

These celebrations and examples—on or offline—give friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances a real-life example of committed, child-centric family life. *Beholding* these seemingly small examples can have a culture-wide impact. *Become* a responsible adult, and let the world *behold* how you live it out.

Promoting the Ideal in Policy

The Law is a Teacher

The law plays an integral part in shaping our culture. It codifies norms we as a society recognise are foundational to our flourishing and wellbeing. At present, there are movements afoot to expand adult interests at the expense of the rights and interests of the natural family. Yet, it is possible to protect the centre—the natural family—while also accommodating those on the margins, whose reality has deviated from that centre.

The issue of protecting the family through law is already being raised regarding the rights of parents to teach their children according to their values, and to access the material which state educational institutions are using. Recognising parental rights in the raising of their own children is incredibly important; however, there is, as yet little recognition of the importance of children's rights to be nurtured by both of their parents. The parent-child relationship is two-way, and its value equally paramount for both sides. Therefore, this importance should be equally reflected in terms of rights. Yet, the law "teaches" children that there is nothing distinct or beneficial about the love and care of their

mother and father over any other adult, ignorant to the wealth of evidence that suggests otherwise.⁸⁶ The law therefore has a significant role to play in restoring the claim children have to their parents.

Elevating the Natural Family

There are many ways in which the law can elevate—and celebrate—the natural family. As the evidence shows, the state has an obvious interest in child-centric policymaking. Children raised in the home of their married mother and father are at lower risk of neglect, abuse, substance abuse, child poverty, and incarceration. Child-centric policymaking not only safeguards individual children, but also it maximises government resources. Prioritising this arrangement relieves stress on government anti-poverty, anti-crime, and child protective programmes.

Restoring the primacy of the child-parent relationship relies on maintaining or creating legal pathways which support the natural family, especially in light of the social science evidence that children thrive when they are raised by their mother and father. Where states and countries have legislated to allow other familial arrangements, it may be necessary to identify other ways—perhaps in common law—to promote the unique stature and standing of the natural family and children’s access to their biological parents. Through financial, and other, incentives, governments could encourage parents to raise their children together in a married relationship so that children can receive the answer to their fundamental longing for identity and belonging.

Stabilising Marriage

Children need stability to develop and thrive. One of the best ways to create this stability is through a permanent mother-father bond. In the face of an uncertain world, the certainty that a child’s parents will remain together forever gives the child a sure foundation on which to navigate the vagaries of life. This is why the loss of a parent, through death or divorce, is so destabilising for a child regardless of their age.

Unfortunately, we live in a fallen world where it is difficult to live out the ideal. Marriages come to an end for many reasons, for example when a spouse is “at fault” of breaking marital vows via adultery, addiction, abuse, or abandonment. In those cases, society’s legal and social systems are structured to provide for the innocent spouse with assets and custody of the children. These cases are regrettable, but support is in place to help spouses and children through this difficult process.

Our culture has gone a step further with no-fault divorce. No-fault divorce permits divorce for any and every reason, and two-thirds of no-fault divorces occur in low-conflict marriages.⁸⁷ While this arrangement may benefit the separating parties, for children it is a highly traumatic event. Likely because they can find no explanation for the demise of their united home other than “it must be my fault,” children of no-fault divorce experienced the most stress from their parents’ split.⁸⁸ If we as a society recognise just how important it is for children to grow up in stable homes, our laws should be structured to encourage parents to remain together, rather than walk away from their lifelong commitments. However, instead no-fault divorce has contributed to the belief that marital relationships are transient and do not merit sacrificial investment from both partners.⁸⁹

In order for marital law to protect the rights and wellbeing of children, its attitude to divorce should recognise that marriage is intended to be a permanent, lifelong commitment, and divorce is reserved for holding a spouse to account if they break their vows or risk harm to their partner. The recognition of “fault” in the divorce process also allows the law to protect vulnerable individuals facing

mistreatment from a spouse, and ensure they are not left devoid of their rightful contact with their children, or property and financial stability.

Reclaiming Parenthood

There are many ways our culture can reclaim parenthood and recognise the importance of mothers and fathers. This paper recognises that the state should not act to prevent any form of adult consensual relationship, and this should be the choice and responsibility of individuals. However, if we are concerned with the welfare of children growing up in our society, then there is a case for the state *promoting* the one form of relationship which provides children with the stability, nurture, identity, and love they need to thrive—one in which their parents are committed to protecting their family unit for life. Children have an evidence-based need to know and be loved by their biological parents.⁹⁰ Yet, there are various moves afoot to erase one or both of a child’s biological parents from their identity and history. For instance, referring to mothers and fathers as “parent one” and “parent two” in legislation or on birth certificates dilutes the central role a mother and a father play in helping their children discover who they are and where they belong.

Child-Centric Adoption

As a society, we need to reorient our perspective on policies designed to improve children’s lives. For example, much emphasis is placed on the *parents* seeking to adopt children, but more attention must be paid to the *children* being adopted. Child-centric adoption recognises that the child is the client—not the intended parents—and adoption is a success when every child is placed in a safe, loving home. Viewed in this way, choosing the best parents for adopted children means not every adult who desires a child will receive one. Rather, child-centric adoption means that children will be placed in homes best suited to meet their needs and help them to thrive.

In adoption, the adults do the hard thing by undergoing screenings, background checks, references, home studies, financial and physical evaluations, and more. This rigorous screening is designed to ensure children are matched with parents who are able to raise them in environments where they are cherished and loved. In this context, child-centric adoption should strive, insofar as possible, to match children with parents who can provide them with a stable family life and help them explore the answers to their existential questions related to identity and belonging. Extended family also play a vital role in helping adopted children answer these questions and develop in healthy, resilient ways.

Truthful Birth Certificates

The reality of biological parenthood must be honoured on children’s birth certificates.

Articles 7 and 8 of the UNCRC states that each child shall be “registered immediately after birth” with an “official record” that safeguards the child’s “name, nationality, and family ties.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains the importance of a factual birth certificate: “... it’s a small paper but it actually establishes who you are and gives access to the rights and the privileges, and the obligations, of citizenship.”⁹¹

Birth certificates are critical in securing a child’s rights and identity. Social, cultural, or political forces should not be permitted to alter or exploit it. The rights of children to know the identities of their biological parents must take priority over the sometimes-competing preferences of adults.

We must insist that birth certificates serve children, not adults. International law recognises that a child has a right to know his or her biological identity and a birth certificate is their best legal shot at accessing it. There are alternative ways to recognise other parenting or guardianship arrangements without adulterating this primary identifying document. The birth certificate should reveal, not erase, a child's genetic parentage. Evidence highlighted earlier in this paper shows this is a critical factor in a child's identity formation.

Our legal structures should reflect these desired aims. The desires of individuals should not take priority over the best interests of children.

Technology

Begotten not Made

Any technological intervention must take care to respect the child and parents involved. Many couples struggle to conceive children naturally, and their journey to parenthood may be marred with suffering, loss, and grief. Remedies that enable couples to conceive children should recognise the inherent dignity of all parties—mother, father, child—involved.

Technological interventions need to be sensitive to the struggles that children conceived through IVF face. Earlier, this paper explained how genealogical bewilderment arises and why the need for children, especially donor-conceived or adopted children, to know the biological identity of their parents is so profound.⁹² One way to preserve children's need to know their biological parents is to implant one egg from the mother using the sperm from the father and attempt the procedure one embryo at a time. This approach respects the dignity of all parties involved and does not rupture the child's ability to know his or her identity or biological parents.

The converse approach through the use of a stranger's sperm or egg will always separate a child from one of the two people to whom they have a natural right—a child's biological parents. This process, which includes purchasing half or all of a child's genetic origins, commodifies children, and disregards their fundamental needs and longings.⁹³

Surrogacy may cause similar "primal wounds" for children. Even if the child's genetic mother and father raise him or her, the child will attach to the surrogate while in the womb and, upon birth, will consider the surrogate his or her mother. Studies show that maternal separation is a major physiological stressor for the infant.⁹⁴ Even brief maternal deprivation can permanently alter the structure of an infant's brain.⁹⁵ This suffering is experienced by many adoptees as well, who suffer a "primal wound" from losing their mother on the day of their birth.⁹⁶ This trauma hinders lifelong attachment, bonding, and impacts psychological outcomes.⁹⁷

A child-centric approach to technological interventions that aid conception honours the dignity and existential desires of the child involved. Collectively, we must work together to ensure these interventions create the least amount of harm and promote children's connection to their biological parents.

Empowering Individuals to Take Action

In mending our social fabric, married mothers and fathers raising their children together are the smallest and most critical stitches. Children thrive in stable, loving homes, where they are free to ask, “Who am I?” and feel safe to explore the answer to this question. It is through a child’s loving, healthy relationship with both parents that a child discovers the foremost answer to this foundational question and develops in a secure environment. There may be obstacles to achieving this ideal. But parents, policymakers, and people of goodwill can work together to transform our culture into one which prioritises children’s interests and puts their needs first.

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“Rat and human brains have similar structure and connectivity,’ [associate professor of psychology] Laphish said.

‘Understanding what happens in the brain of a young rat that’s removed from its mother gives us important insight into how this type of early trauma-- perhaps comparable to the incarceration of a human mother-- affects the young human brain...In this study, we found memory impairment, as well as less communication between brain regions, in the animals that had been removed from their mothers, among other neurological changes,’ said study corresponding author Sarine Janetsian-Fritz,...

‘These are all clues to how a traumatic event early in life could increase a person’s risk of receiving a schizophrenia diagnosis in the future.’” See, “Even Brief Maternal Deprivation Early in Life Alters Adult Brain Function and Cognition: Rat Study.”

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“The impact of trauma on functioning is both physical and psychological,’ as heightened levels of cortisol and adrenaline raise anxiety levels leading to difficulties with concentration, while lower levels of serotonin lead to depression, making feelings of shame harder to manage.”

“...The trauma victim becomes reactive rather than reflective and experiences disabling feelings around issues of belonging and abandonment. A hunger for attachment means that the capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear. In relationships there is a belief that they cannot be accepted for who they are and the sufferer is left literally in two minds; at best indecisive and at worst questioning their sanity.”

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ISBN: 978-1-916948-10-5

www.arc-research.org

October 2023