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# Reversing Teen Pregnancy and Single Parenthood

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When I was growing up, marriage was something one took for granted. Its desirability was unquestioned. Especially if one were a girl, it was at the center of one's dreams and aspirations. This was at a time when women had few roles or opportunities beyond being a wife and mother. We even joked in college that you should have a ring by spring or get your money back.

Needless to say, a lot has changed—and changed, in many respects, for the better. Marriage is no longer the principal source of economic and social status for women. No one need feel trapped inside an abusive or neglectful relationship because there are so few other options. And as a result of widening opportunities, women have gained considerable leverage with which to bargain for more equal treatment and respect within marriage. In my first book, *Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women* (coauthored

with Heather Ross and published by the Urban Institute in 1975), we argued that rising divorce rates were one consequence of women's no longer being tied to a single life script.

A weapon like divorce doesn't have to be used to be effective. The mere threat or availability of the option may be enough to change behavior. Our research, and that of others, provided lots of empirical support for the idea that women's expanding opportunities were simultaneously responsible for rising divorce rates on the one hand and for better—including more egalitarian—marriages on the other. We also predicted that once the wider culture had adapted to women's new roles, and men in particular had adjusted their expectations and behaviors, the divorce rate would level off, but at a new and higher level. That, of course, is exactly what happened in the early 1980s. And I, for one, would most certainly not want to turn back the clock.

It is less clear to me how all of this has affected men. The politically correct position is to argue that it has made their lives better as well. I would like to think that this is true, but it may not be, and a part of me will always be just a tiny bit suspicious that advocates of marriage are people who want to return to a world in which men resume their “rightful place” as patriarchs within the family. In short, there are some good reasons why feminists are wary of the new emphasis on revitalizing marriage as an institution.

That said, the research suggests that two married parents with a lifelong commitment to each other is the best environment for raising children. In addition, the much greater social acceptability of divorce has increased the likelihood that couples will split up over relatively minor differences. And the spread of no-fault divorce in the wake of this more permissive environment has made women who choose to invest in homemaking or child rearing vulnerable to being left in the lurch. Finally, higher divorce rates have made the younger generation wary of marriage and eroded the social support that young married couples once received from family and friends.

### ***Giving Marriage a Chance***

Even more troubling than increased divorce is the dramatic increase in childbearing outside of marriage. One-third of all children born in the United States are now born to unmarried women. In cases of divorce, at least people have tried and failed. In the case of nonmarital childbearing, the

adults involved have not even given marriage a chance. Moreover, many divorced parents retain strong relationships with their children because of early bonding with that child before the divorce. Contrast this to fathers who have never known, or lived with, their children or whose presence has been more fleeting and sporadic. They are less likely to provide either economic support or the kind of authoritative and nurturing parenting that psychologists tell us children need. Finally, never-married mothers tend to be younger, less well educated, and far poorer than their divorced counterparts. So for all kinds of reasons, this seems like the more serious problem.

What about adults without children? In this case, it’s more difficult to argue that anyone is harmed if marriages don’t take place. Indeed, the fact that many young adults, especially the best educated, are delaying marriage as well as childbearing until they have completed their educations and become well established in their careers has, it seems to me, much to recommend it. Still, marriage can be enormously rewarding, even without children, and as a widow who enjoyed more than forty years of a wonderfully satisfying marriage, I would recommend it highly to anyone who asked.

Research suggests that people who marry are better off in all sorts of ways than those who don’t. Some of this is because marriage is selective of people who are healthier, wealthier, or better adjusted to begin with, and we shouldn’t attribute all of the supposed benefits of marriage to the institution itself. At

the same time, some of the effects appear to be real. And although I'm not sure I would go so far as to base public policy on the idea that adults may have happier or more productive lives if they are married, it is worth publicizing these facts about the benefits of marriage so that people can make more informed choices.

So, in my view, the case for revitalizing marriage in cases where children are involved is much stronger than in cases where people do not choose to have children or have already completed their childbearing. And the need to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing is much more pressing than the need to reduce the divorce rate, which has been relatively stable for almost two decades. The question, then, is what can be done to reduce childbearing outside of marriage?

### ***Single Parents, Teenage Moms***

The good news here is that the proportion of children born out of wedlock, after having risen dramatically for decades, leveled off in the late 1990s. The bad news is that as a society we are in the process of normalizing single parenthood. Almost half of Americans under the age of thirty-five believe that a single mother can bring up her child as well as a married couple, according to the General Social Survey. This contrasts with the 18 percent who hold this view among adults over the age of sixty-five, a group that still believes people should marry before having children. The proportion of black adults who

believe that child rearing outside of marriage is acceptable is almost twice as high as the comparable white proportion, perhaps reflecting the reality these blacks observe within their own African American communities.

This normalization of nonmarital childbearing and single parenting suggests that it would take strong policies to turn the situation around, especially in low-income minority communities. Yet public officials and leaders have, for the most part, been reluctant to take on this challenge for fear of stigmatizing single parents or appearing to cast moral aspersions on what are usually deemed to be private matters. And even those who are willing to tackle these difficult issues will find that the menu of proven or effective policy measures is sparse. This doesn't mean nothing can or should be done.

To begin with, we should work harder to reduce teenage pregnancy. Half of first out-of-wedlock births are to women under the age of twenty. Thus, if we were to reduce teen births, we would simultaneously reduce childbearing outside of marriage. A woman who has already had a child out of wedlock as a teenager is much less likely to marry in her twenties and much more likely to have additional children outside of marriage. In short, although it is true that many single women in their twenties have babies, the pattern typically starts in the teen years. These young unwed mothers are also the ones most likely to end up poor and on welfare, with all of the concomitant consequences for their children later in life.

Reducing teen pregnancy is not easy, but in the past five years we have learned quite a bit about how to do it. Some effective programs have been identified, based on rigorous research and evaluation. Some of these programs strongly encourage abstinence and teach teens how to delay having sex but provide them with reliable information about birth control as well. (So far, adequate evaluations of so-called abstinence-only programs have not been done, although some are under way.) Other programs involve young people in meaningful community service with adult supervision and counseling. The success of these programs suggests that one reason teens get pregnant is that they have too much unsupervised time. In this context, after-school programs could help to reduce a variety of risky behaviors among adolescents, including too-early sex and pregnancy.

But programs are only one, and probably not the most important, means of reducing teen pregnancy. The historical evidence suggests that more teens are getting pregnant not because there are too few programs, but because cultural norms about appropriate behavior have shifted dramatically. Today's teens perceive that all of their friends are sexually active and feel pressured to join the crowd. What is needed in this environment is a change in peer group beliefs and norms as well as more parental involvement to help children resist such pressures. In recognition of this reality, states and nonprofit groups such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy are putting new

emphasis on media campaigns designed to change attitudes and, eventually, behavior. Our preliminary evidence suggests such efforts are far more cost-effective than programs, yet there is no source of public funding for such initiatives at the national level.

### ***Tax Incentives for Married Parents***

A second and much more controversial step that could be taken would be to link an increase in the child tax credit to marriage. Current tax law allows parents to claim a personal exemption for each child as well as a separate child tax credit, scheduled to increase to \$1,000 per child as part of the tax bill enacted in 2001. One option would be to boost it still higher but to make it available only to children born to married couples. To provide the greatest incentives for in-wedlock childbearing, the proposal would be prospective; that is, only children born in the future to married couples would qualify. Moreover, the credit would be available only for the first five years of the child's life, when the income forgone by one parent's not working, or the cost of child care, looms especially large. In addition, no more than two baby bonuses per family would be allowed. Limiting the credit in these ways would permit making it far more generous at a cost that would still be affordable.

Imagine telling a young couple that their soon-to-be-born baby will make them eligible for \$2,000 of extra assistance from the government if they marry before the birth and up to

\$10,000 if they remain married until the child is five years old. The credit would be available only to couples with earnings but might be partially refundable for those with limited earned income. Single parents would continue to get all existing benefits such as the earned income tax credit and the existing child credit but would not qualify for this new "baby bonus." Thus, they would be no worse off. There is a risk, of course, that some couples would marry for financial reasons alone and that the marriages would be highly unstable or unsatisfactory. For these reasons, it would be a good idea to condition the bonus on the willingness of

the parents to seek premarital counseling and education in cases where the marriage was clearly triggered by the birth of the baby. But, as the modern equivalent of the shotgun marriages of the past, it might just work.

This last idea could be tried out initially in one state and carefully evaluated. In this way we would learn more about its potential effectiveness and needed improvements. Given the controversy it is likely to create as well as our current lack of knowledge about how well it would work in practice, this might be the most sensible way to proceed. ■