

Strengthening Families
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Almost 15 years ago, I spoke to this topic at a conference at the University of Alberta. Re-reading the text (available online at <http://www.davidkilgour.com/mp/family2.htm>), a number of the points seem even more applicable today. Let me offer some of them in shortened form for your consideration:

- ...Few would deny the importance of the family in either the inclusive or traditional sense as a social unit which makes up the core of our society...It is through the family... that community values are upheld or discarded. The upheavals the family has experienced... emphasize the need to strengthen it...Human beings benefit greatly from being raised in nurturing, stable and supportive families... We should work together – governments, social advocacy groups, and academia – to develop policies that support the family, rather than contribute – often unintentionally – to its breakdown...

Canadian Families

- The Angus Reid Group released a report on the state of the Canadian family (in about 1995). Overall, it found a strong belief that Canada's families are in crisis (63%). The reasons cited included the "rate of divorce and instability of the family unit" (28%), "financial difficulties" (15%), "lack of values in society" (18%), "violence and crime" (13%), and "unemployment" (12%).
- With dual income parents, a fifth of our children go home to an empty house after school. As one Canadian author on child health notes: "The bottom line is that many kids these days are raising themselves."... The often-challenging task of balancing work and family creates substantial stress for parents and takes a toll in diminished family life and child welfare.
- ... (A) study by Canada's Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) examined the link between family life and smoking, heavy drinking, drug use, delinquency, and drinking and driving... it indicated that the strength of family relationships has more impact on child behaviour than their family's structure. "Youth who feel relationships within the family are important and who spend time with their families, were much less likely to engage in drug use and other problem behaviours", said ARF scientist Ed Adlaf...(W)hat our children want and need most from us is our time.

Family Time Famine

- ...Dr. Paul Steinhauer a psychiatrist at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children, points at what he calls "family time famine" ... "Never before", he says, "in the sixty years in which statistics have been kept, have children spent so few working hours in the company of their parents." One study shows that parents see their children 10 to 12 fewer working hours a week than families did 30 years ago...(Someone told me not long ago that teenagers spend today on average about ten minutes daily with their fathers.)
- Most jobs are still designed with a traditional family structure in perspective. There is little or no flexibility in the workplace, especially in management. The resulting stress impacts on the mental health of not only employees but also on their children...

Divorce

- ...Children are the main victims of divorce even though in many cases they are also suffering in their parent's unhappy marriage. Divorce sometimes offers solutions to adults, yet it is frequently devastating for children. One child psychologist who studied her clients over a 25-year period said that fully one-third of children reported moderate or severe depression five years after a divorce... Children of divorce often grow up wary of love, marriage and family, and over a third have little or no ambition ten years after their parents split. The head of a Toronto divorce support service Rhonda Freeman, claims that in 25 years she has yet to meet a child who has experienced no effects from divorce. In Canada, divorce – a rarity before 1968 – has become a mainstream, socially accepted occurrence..."

Increasingly, family advocates and social workers in Canada and abroad concentrate on devising approaches to preventing family and marriage breakdown. Preventing divorce seems far better than dealing with its consequences...(M)andatory parenting and marriage education appears to be gaining support across this country...

Values

- Character and sound values are best-developed in home settings; the lack of those in young people is blamed often on lack of parental concern. "The irony is that we have the best group of educated parents in history doing the least for their own children," observed historian, Maris Vinovskis of the University of Michigan. The extraordinary academic achievements of Asian students are pointed at, especially the children of poor and

linguistically disadvantaged boat people who are "walking away with fellowships." Their success is attributed in part to their culture of strong family systems where values like activity, responsibility and work are both taught and lived...

- An American philosopher, Christina Sommers, charges that today's young people are suffering from "cognitive moral confusion". They not only have trouble distinguishing right from wrong – which make them ethically illiterate – they question whether such standards even exist... "We must make students aware that there is a standard of ethical ideals that all civilizations worthy of the name have discovered. We must encourage them to read the Bible, Aristotle's 'Ethics', Shakespeare's "King Lear", the Koran, and the Analects of Confucius. When they read almost any great work, they will encounter these basic moral values: integrity, respect for human life, self-control, honesty, courage and self-sacrifice."
- Stephen Covey, author of a world-wide best-seller teaching business people to be more principled, applied his concepts to family life... *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*. He says he and his spouse practised the principles outlined in his book in his own family of nine children and 27 grandchildren. For Covey, "family itself is a we experience, a we mentality. And admittedly, the movement from 'me' to 'we' – from independence to inter-dependence – is perhaps one of the most challenging and difficult aspects of family life". Against the background of the priorities of modern-American culture that places priority on individual freedom, immediate gratification, efficiency, Covey notes about family " ... there is literally no road laden with as much joy and satisfaction as the road of rich, inter-dependent family living"

CONCLUSION

Permit me to refer you to the OECD report, *Doing Better for Families*, published last year. You can access it at www.oecd.org/social/family/doingbetter. Part of the foreward reads:

Families are the cornerstone of society. They play a central economic role, creating economies of scale for people living together and as the source of home production. They are a crucial engine of solidarity, redistributing resources (cash, in-kind or time) among individuals, households and generations. They provide protection and insurance against hardship. Families offer identity, love, care and development to their members and form the core of many social networks.

Families are changing. Life expectancy is higher, birth rates lower. In many families today, there are more grandparents and fewer children. Many families now live in non-traditional arrangements: there is more cohabitation, people marry at older ages, marriages end in divorce more often and remarriages are increasing. Parents' aspirations have changed and across the OECD many fathers and mothers both want to combine a career and an active family life. Children have fewer siblings and live more often with cohabiting or sole parents. More children are growing up in blended families of re-partnered adults...

This book looks at how family policy is developing in the changing family context, and considers the different ways in which governments support families. It first presents a range of work, family and child outcomes and then seeks to provide answers to the following questions: Is spending on family benefits going up, and how does it vary by the age of the child? What is the best way of helping adults to have the number of children they desire? What are the effects of parental leave schemes on female labour supply, and on child well-being? Are childcare costs a barrier to parental employment and how can flexible workplace options help? What is the best time for mothers to go back to work after childbirth? And what are the best policies to reduce poverty among sole parents? The book concludes with an initial cross-country analysis of the relatively neglected topic of child maltreatment.

Thank you.