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The Power of the Two-Parent Home

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

After the gospel, there is no bigger gift you can give to the world than your children and no better gift you can give your children than to be raised by a mom and dad who love them and love each other.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads from the article he wrote for the Spring 2022 issue of Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology.

Transcript

Greetings and salutations, welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. This is Kevin DeYoung. Today I'm reading an article from Eikon, a journal for Biblical Anthropology.

This is the journal that comes out from the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. CBMW re-did their journal a couple of years ago, renamed it EiKon, which is the Greek word for image. They've really done a nice job, Danny Burke and others who put this together.

This latest issue, Spring 2022, just came out a week or two ago. It has a lot of articles, some more academics, some historical interviews, some more pastoral, really well done. I have written an article called The Power of the Two-Parent Home.

It's a little more of an academic article. There's some 20 footnotes. I won't stop to give you the footnotes except for maybe one or two that are worth reading.

But here is The Power of the Two-Parent Home, a new article that I've written for EiKon. Humanly speaking, there is nothing more important for personal well-being, positive social behavior, and general success in life than being raised by one's biological parents committed to each other in a stable marriage. Over the past 40 years, a vast body of research has demonstrated conclusively that children are deeply affected by family structure and that married parents are best for children.

Any efforts, whether governmental, educational, or ecclesiastical, that mean to

encourage human flourishing must take this reality into account as both an explanation for many societal ills and as a means to the end of hoped-for societal health and vitality. Not a myth. Family life in America has changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time.

In 1960, 73% of children lived with two parents in their first marriage. By 2014, less than half, 46% of children were living in this type of family. Conversely, the percentage of children living with a single parent rose from 9% in 1960 to 26% in 2014.

An additional 7% of children now live with cohabiting parents. Moreover, the increase in non-traditional family arrangements has coincided with the decoupling of marriage and childbearing. In 1960, just 5% of all births occurred outside of marriage.

By 2000, around 40% of all births occurred outside of marriage, a percentage that has held steady over the last 20 years. As of 2014, 29% of births to white women, 53% of births to Hispanic women, and 71% of births to black women were out of wedlock. In the span of 60 years, what were once considered exceptional family circumstances have become the norm.

Given the changing portrait of the American family, it is not surprising that many people believe, or given the uncomfortable prospect of implicitly judging others, feel compelled to say they believe, that there is no difference between one parent or two parents when it comes to raising children. According to one online survey, "More than 70% of participants believed that a single parent can do just as good a job as two parents." Further, 60% of women "agreed that children do best with multiple adults invested and helping, but that two married parents are not necessary." Christina Cross, writing in the *New York Times*, went so far as to decry what she called "the myth of the two parent home," citing evidence that black children and two parent families still fare worse than white children and two parent families. But Cross's argument fails to take into account how much better all children do in two parent families compared to one parent families of the same race.

The percentage of white children living in poverty goes from 31% in families with only a mother to 17% in families with only a father, all the way down to 5% in families with a married couple. The same percentages for black children go from 45% mother only to 36% father only to 12% married couple. We can lament that black children and two parent families are still 2.4 times more likely to be in poverty than white children, 12% to 5%.

But we should also observe that white children raised by only a mother are 2.6 times as likely to be in poverty as black children raised by two parents, 31% versus 12%. While there are still advantages to being white in this country, the much bigger advantage is being raised by two parents. It is better in America to be a black child raised by two parents than to be a white child in a one parent home.

The breakdown of the family is not a black problem, it is a problem wherever two parent families decline and single parent households become normalized. Family structure and child well being. The conclusion that children raised by their biological married parents do better by almost every measure has been proven in hundreds of studies over the last decade.

And here there is a footnote that perhaps is worth mentioning as it has to do with children born to biological versus adopted married parents. Here is the footnote. The term biological is used to distinguish between adoptive parents and step parents.

Citing testimony from Nicholas Zill in 1995, the article referenced below from the Center for Law and Social Policy claims that "adopted children have very similar outcomes to children raised by both biological parents". A new study, however, authored by Nicholas Zill and W Bradford Wilcox, concludes that adopted children, despite being placed with highly educated parents who have above average incomes, exhibit more academic behavioral and mental health problems than children raised by their married biological parents. The last paragraph from the study is worth quoting in full.

There is little question, "Get adopted children are better off than they would be in long-term foster or institutional care". At the same time, the survey data reveal the complex challenges adopted children face in overcoming the effects of early stress, deprivation and the loss of the biological family. It is vital that current and potential adoptive parents be aware of the challenges they may face as well as the eventual benefits that will accrue to them and the child as a result of the love and resources they provide and the struggles they endure.

Back to the main text of the article. One of the best and most concise summaries of the academic literature comes from a policy brief published in 2003 by the Center for Law and Social Policy. Signing a 1994 study by Sarah McClanahan and Gary Sandifer, the 2003 brief notes that children who do not live with both biological parents were roughly twice as likely to be poor, to have birth outside of marriage, to have behavioral and psychological problems, and to not graduate from high school.

Another study found that children in single-parent homes were more likely to experience health problems such as accidents, injuries and poisonings. Other research found that children living with single mothers were five times as likely to be poor. Importantly, not all types of single-parent households fare the same.

Children of widowed parents, for example, do better than children in families with divorced or cohabiting parents. Children of divorce are two and a half times as likely to have serious social, emotional or psychological problems as children from intact families. Likewise, children in cohabiting families are at a higher risk of poor outcomes than a host of economic and emotional categories.

Critically, these poor outcomes are not erased when the single-parent family is better off financially. Marriage is the issue, not economics. 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 their own lives.

Children who grow up in a single, step or cohabiting parent household. Compared to children who are raised by their married parents, children and other family types are more likely to achieve lower levels of education, to become teen parents, to experience health behavior and mental health problems. Children in single and cohabiting parent families are more likely to be poor.

An updated analysis comes from the fall 2015 issue of the journal *The Future of Children*. A near introduction to the issue, Sarah McLannahan and Isabelle Sawhill, take it as a given that quote, "most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes." Even with this consensus, there is still disagreement about why marriage is so important. In his article in the same journal, David Rebar analyzes a number of possible mechanisms that make marriage so effective.

Economic resources, specialization, father involvement, parents, physical and mental health, parenting quality and skills, social support, health insurance, home ownership, parental relationships, bargaining power, family stability, net wealth, borrowing constraints, informal social networks and the efficiencies of married life. Rebar concludes that while these factors often play a role in the benefits of marriage, the advantages of marriage are hard to replicate by augmenting these factors alone. In other words, he says quote, "The advantages of marriage for children appear to be the sum of many, many parts." And as such, the best policy interventions are those that bolster marriages themselves.

More recently, Katie Faust and Stacey Manning have summarized much of the primary source research in their 2021 book, *Them Before Us, Why We Need a Global Children's Rights Movement*." Again, we find that children reared in intact homes do best on educational achievement, emotional health, familial and sexual development and delinquency and incarceration. Children living with a mother's boyfriend are about 11 times more likely to be sexually, physically or emotionally abused than children living with their married biological parents. And children separated from one or both of their biological parents are one and a half times as likely to experience financial difficulty, six times as likely to have witnessed neighborhood violence, 15 times as likely to have witnessed caregiver or parental violence, 11 times as likely to have lived with a caregiver or parent with a drug or alcohol problem, and 17 times as likely to have had a caregiver or parent in jail.

In short, there is virtually no measurement of well-being in which it is not a significant,

indeed often life-altering advantage to be raised by one's biological and married father and mother, in support of children and the future. As Christians, of course, our ultimate confidence does not rest in the findings of social science research. We know from the Bible that God created one man and one woman to enter into the covenant of marriage, and that from this conjugal union, God desires children to be produced, and that these children are a blessing to their parents and ought to be brought up by their mother and father in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

Scientific research is valuable insofar as it can reinforce the truths of the Bible and principles of natural law, namely that when we observe the way the world works and does not work, it becomes abundantly clear that marriage matters for human flourishing almost more than anything else. So what can we do to strengthen marriages and promote the well-being of children? Let me close with four brief suggestions. First, pastors, Christian educators, parents, and church leaders need to do more to teach on this subject.

I do not mean premarital counseling and marriage retreats as important as those are. I mean we must teach more broadly about the crucial importance of marriage as both a personal and public good. Our culture promotes the message that every family arrangement is as good as another.

That is simply not true. We need to help our people understand the reality and see what is at stake. Second, we ought to encourage public policies that make pro-child marriages more attractive and less healthy family arrangements more difficult.

So for example, we should not penalize marriage by tying welfare benefits to singleness. We should make divorce harder, not easier. That is legislation that requires counseling before divorce can be finalized.

We should consider tax benefits that reward marriage and childbearing, and we must dare to talk about fatherlessness as a leading factor, if not the leading factor, in the deterioration of cultural and family health among all races and ethnicities. Third, we should consider how we have normalized behavior that harms children and does not lead to human flourishing. It may not be possible to change the wider culture in such a profound way, but we can start by looking at our own church culture.

This may sound unloving at first, but we must re-stigmatize, fornication, and promiscuity, cohabitation, and no-fault divorce. Social approval for behaviors that used to be considered sinful, or at least inappropriate and unwise, has been a powerful force in changing the state of marriage in the West. Stigma often speaks louder than dogma.

As Christians, we must find ways to lovingly help and forgive those who make mistakes, and especially those who suffer from the mistakes that others have made. I'm not suggesting we stigmatize people, but we should stigmatize sinful behaviors. Everyone in

the church today has been touched by divorce, sex before marriage, or out of wedlock, births.

And here's a footnote worth mentioning, I think. Strictly speaking, Christians ought to stigmatize the behavior that leads to out of wedlock births, i.e. fornication, promiscuity, not the birth itself. When a woman becomes pregnant outside of marriage, the decision to have the child should be celebrated and encouraged.

So out of wedlock births is technically not the problem, but the behavior that has led to the birth. These are difficult subjects to talk about, but we must not bemoan the culture out there, with its sin-enticing, righteousness-denying, worldliness-normalizing ethos, while we are unwilling to deal with compromises in our own midst. Fourth.

And let's call to singleness for kingdom purposes. We must encourage children. Encourage rather Christians.

To get married, have children, stay married, and raise those children in a stable two-parent family. Obviously, the ideal is not always possible. Divorce is not always our choice.

Spouses sometimes die young. Marriage does not always come. Children do not always follow.

That is why we believe in adoption and second chances and in God's good plan and all things. But insofar as most people in the church will marry and have children, they need to hear that getting married, staying married, and raising children in the Lord is no small thing. In fact, it is one of the biggest and best things we can do for the church, for the nation, and for the kingdom.

After the gospel, there is no bigger gift. You can give to the world than your children, and no better gift you can give your children than to be raised by a mom and dad who love them and love each other.

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