

A New Voice Defends Family Life

Abandoning Marriage Comes With High Price Tag

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, MAY. 15, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Families are the cornerstone of society and instrumental to the well-being of individuals. Right?

Right. And such declarations are common from Catholic agencies, steeped in Christian anthropology. But it's not so common to hear these truths from the secular world.

Yet, a recent report on families from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) made just this affirmation.

A media brief accompanying the report, published April 27, stated that families are a key source of financial and social support for people, as well as being a crucial instrument of solidarity.

“Families provide identity, love, care, nurture and development to their members and form the core of many social networks,” it said.

The report, titled “Doing Well for Families,” also recognized that poverty is rising in families with children in nearly all the OECD member countries.

As well, parents are facing problems in trying to combine work and family commitments. The report called for governments to adopt policies that support families by giving them financial assistance and help with things such as parental leave and flexible workplace practices.

According to the OECD on average public spending on family benefits amounts to just over 2.2% of GDP.

One area where more could be done is helping people have more babies. Many families want more children, the report explained, and in many countries people do not have as many children as they say they would like.

Birth rates in OECD countries have fallen substantially from where they were several decades ago when they averaged 2.2 children per woman, to currently just over 1.7 children per woman, according to the report.

Countries with higher fertility give more support both in the form of cash payments and services for families with young children. Policies that enable part-time work for mothers also help families to combine employment and caring for children more effectively.

Supporting families is not just good for the parents, the report pointed out. "Children's well-being is inextricably linked to family well-being. When families flourish, children flourish."

UK study

The importance of family life was also supported by the findings of a large household study in the United Kingdom. Material from a survey of 40,000 households in 2009 was published at the end of February by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex.

The study covered a whole range of issues, but one chapter was dedicated to the family. Among the findings were the following points.

-- When controlled for a number of factors it found that cohabiting people are significantly less happy in their relationships than married people.

-- Young people's satisfaction with their family situation is clearly related to the quality of their parents' relationships. In families where the child's mother is unhappy in her partnership, only 55% of young people say they are "completely happy" with their family situation -- compared with 73% of young people whose mothers are "perfectly happy" in their relationships.

-- Children in lone-parent families were less likely to report themselves completely happy with their situation.

-- Not surprisingly, the study found that children who don't quarrel with either parent more than once a week have a greater level of happiness than those who have more frequent disputes. The survey also found that happiness in children was improved when they discussed important matters with their parents more frequently.

-- Eating an evening meal together as a family is also important. Children who eat an evening meal with their family at least three times a week are substantially more likely to report being completely happy with their family situation than children who never eat with their family, or who eat together less than three times a week.

Quality

The influence of the quality of the parent's relationship upon children was also examined in another recent study in the United States. The research organization Child Trends published a study April 8.

Titled "Parental Relationship Quality and Child Outcomes Across Subgroups," it looked at responses from more than 64,000 people whose children were between the ages of 6 and 17.

It showed that the parents' relationship quality was "very consistently and positively associated with a range of child and family outcomes." This included child behavior problems, performance at school and parent-child communication.

The study also noted that research in past years has suggested that parents in higher quality relationships tend to have better-adjusted children with more positive attitudes toward marriage, which in turn makes it more likely that they will have good quality relationships and marriages.

Commenting on the study, Elizabeth Marquardt, editor of the Web site FamilyScholars.org, and herself an author of a book on how children are affected by divorce, lamented the fact that the commentary on the study kept quiet about how marital status influenced children.

In her commentary on the Web site she explained that delving into the tables and statistics in the study on the type of family relationship provided a vital key to interpreting the findings. Breaking down for family type the survey found that stepchildren were over twice as likely to have behavior problems compared to children living with their own married parents.

The problems increased further for children living with a cohabiting couple. They were almost three times as likely to have problems.

These major differences were also present for other categories, such as social relationships and school behavior.

Marquardt also mentioned that the survey results found that the quality of the relationship between the adults depended in their being a married couple. The greater stability and durability that a married couple have is a significant help for children.

Marriage is good

The news that marriage is good for both couples and children is hardly new, but it keeps on being confirmed by researchers. Earlier in the year Dr. John Gallacher and David Gallacher of Cardiff University's School of Medicine published an article in BMJ Student.

According to an analysis in the Jan. 28 edition of the Independent newspaper, they looked at the question of whether marriage is good for health.

"The bottom line is that medically speaking, the group with the greatest longevity are the marrieds," said Dr. Gallacher.

Their paper referred to a study involving millions of people in seven European countries. It showed mortality rates being 10%-15% above average for married couples. The difference rose the longer a couple had been married.

When it comes to children Kay S. Hymowitz, in an opinion article published by the Los Angeles Times last Nov. 11, argued that unstable relationships are more harmful to children than poverty.

She drew from material published in the fall issue of the magazine Future of Children. The articles in the magazine were conclusions from a study of 5,000 children born to urban and mainly minority parents.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study has tracked these children since they were born in the late 90s.

At the time of birth, half of the couples were living together and they declared to the researchers that there was a good chance they would marry. Nevertheless, five years later only 15% of the unmarried couples were married, and 60% had split up.

Many of the fractured families had financial problems and the children had little contact with their biological father.

The study found that children with single mothers had more behavioral problems than those with two parents and that these problems worsened with every breakup and new relationship.

Will governments respond to the plea by the OECD to increase support for families? The cost of not doing so is too high.

| [More](#)

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the [editor](#).