

Eight Propositions on Family and Child Well-Being

A Report of the

Council on Families in America

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Eight Propositions on Family and Child Well-Being

These propositions seek to address the most important social trend of our era: the declining well-being of children in the United States.

We are scholars and analysts who have come together to form the *Council on Families in America* -- a volunteer, nonpartisan program of scholarly research and interdisciplinary deliberation on the state of families in America. We come from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum.

We esteem tolerance and privacy as basic values. In a free society, people are permitted to live in diverse social arrangements without fear of harassment. But we also insist upon this central fact: today there is widespread and growing evidence of failure in the rearing of children. Accordingly, it is important to uphold those institutions and values which are most likely to safeguard the needs and interests of children.

Based on our analysis of the historical and empirical evidence, and motivated by our belief that the recent "family values" debate suffered from the absence of clear definition, we offer the following propositions on the family in America:

1. In order to develop emotionally, socially, and morally, a child requires a strong, warm, lasting, and loving attachment with at least one and preferably two or more adults who are deeply committed to that child's well-being.

2. A basic social purpose of the family is to rear children to become adults who are self-confident, socially responsible, and capable of attachment and trust. The family, in short, carries the key social and moral responsibility for raising the next generation.

3. Today the family is in a crisis that fundamentally threatens the well-being of our nation's children. The marriage bond is steadily weakening. Indeed, marriage is becoming deinstitutionalized. Children are spending less time with their parents, especially their fathers. Across the society, children are less valued. In short, the child-centered, two-parent family shows growing signs of disintegration. This disintegration is reflected most clearly in the high rate of divorce and the steady growth of unwed parenthood.

4. The current disintegration of the well-functioning, two-parent family is a central cause of rising individual and social pathology: delinquency and crime (including an alarming juvenile homicide rate), drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, eating disorders, and the growing number of children in poverty. The evidence is strong and growing that the current generation of children and youth is the first in our nation's history to be less well-off -- psychologically, socially, economically, and morally -- than their parents were at the same age.

5. Family ties were relatively strong in the "traditional nuclear family," with its strict social roles of male breadwinner and female homemaker. That family form was the cultural ideal in America from the early 1800s to the early 1960s. Today, because of the importance of female equality and the changing conditions of modern society, that previous model of life-long, separate-sphere gender roles within marriage is no longer desirable or possible on a society-wide scale.

6. Yet the model of the two-parent family, based on a lasting, monogamous marriage, remains both possible and desirable. Considering all of the alternatives, this family form is by far the most efficacious one for childrearing and for long-term individual and societal well-being.

7. The characteristics of an ideal social environment for childrearing consist of an enduring, two-biological-parent family that engages regularly in activities together, has many of its own routines, traditions, and stories, and provides a great deal of contact between adults and children. The children have frequent interaction with relatives, with neighbors in a supportive neighborhood, and with their parents' world of work, coupled with no pervasive worry that their parents will break up. Finally, each of these ingredients comes together in the development of a rich family subculture that has lasting meaning and strongly promulgates such family values as responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and sharing. These values, in turn, are vital to the maintenance and achievement of competence, character, and citizenship as we enter the twenty-first century. Today, with each passing year, fewer and fewer of our nation's children can reasonably expect to grow up in such an environment.

8. A major cultural and policy imperative for our time is to increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents in supportive communities and to decrease the proportion of children who do not.

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Council Members

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The Council on Families in America is sponsored by the Institute for American Values.

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