

# ED330496 1991-00-00 What's Happening to American Families? ERIC Digest.

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## What's Happening to American Families? ERIC Digest.

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Few issues vex Americans more than what has happened to the role of the family in caring for children. Almost one in four of the nation's youngsters under 18 lives with only one parent, almost always the mother. If the youngster is black, the ratio rises to one in

two. The divorce ratio has tripled and the percentage of out-of-wedlock births among teenage women has doubled over the past 15 years.

Caring for infants is not just a dilemma for female-headed households. Whether or not the family is intact, more than half of all mothers with a preschool child are in the labor force, 50 percent more than the proportion employed out of the home a decade ago. The Labor Department reports that the number of women holding two or more jobs has increased five-fold since 1970.

What we need, we hear on all sides, is a return to the good old days when parents were responsible for their kids and kids obeyed their parents. We long for a return to an age when fundamental values were shared by all. If there WAS such an age, can we go back to it? No one doubts that today's family is harassed and overburdened. The question is: could what seemed to work then work now?

In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, the American family has been stripped of two of its traditional social functions: serving as a unit for economic production and as a school for the vocational training of children. The first function has been usurped by commercial firms, the second by the state. Two functions remain: first, the physical and emotional gratification of the family's adult members, and second, the socialization of the children into community mores and the promotion of their development.

The family was once an interdependent economic unit to which all members contributed. It produced most of the goods it consumed. As households began to specialize in cash crops, household self-sufficiency declined. Cottage industries were eliminated as more and more goods were produced in factories. Parental authority was no longer reinforced by control over property inheritance and the acquisition of craft skills. Children ceased being economic assets as they had been on the farm; instead, they required substantial outlays for their upbringing.

Women's roles in the family were also transformed. At the turn of the century, women spent virtually all their adult lives bearing and rearing children. Now, female life expectancy is longer by 30 years and women have 30 to 40 years of postreproductive life. There has been a remarkable increase in female participation in the labor force. Today, both marriage partners need to bring in income to meet family bills. Although women are less financially dependent on their husbands, they continue to bear the major burden of household and child care chores whether they work or not.

There has been a marked reduction in the salience of the family. Since 1960, the proportion of women not marrying has doubled; the probability of divorce has risen to 50 percent. With one interruption--the post-World War II baby boom--rates of childbearing have declined steadily over the past two centuries, from a total fertility rate of 7 in 1800 to 1.8 today.

In the modal American family of the 1980s and 1990s, both parents are at work outside the home. This has major consequences for family life, consequences captured by the phrase TIME POVERTY. The economist Victor Fuchs has calculated that between 1960 and 1986, the opportunity for children to spend time with parents declined by 10 hours per week for the average white child, and 12 hours for the black child. The principal reason is the increase in the proportion of mothers holding paid jobs; not far behind is the increase in one-parent households. Fathers in intact families could offset the loss in hours of mothering by doing more fathering; there is little evidence that they do so.

Today, 21 percent of U.S. children grow up in poverty. For children in young families--that is, with parents under 30--the figure is 35 percent. These data reflect the decline in real dollar incomes for young families and the growing percentage of single-parent families. From 1979 to 1987, the average family income of the poorest fifth of U.S. families declined by 10 percent, and that of the poorest fifth of black families by 20 percent. During the same period, family income for the top fifth grew by 16 percent. The news is even grimmer for young single-parent families; 75 percent of their children live in poverty.

What social policies will increase the likelihood that our children will thrive? I believe we need four policy initiatives: protection of young mothers and their children against poverty; paid parental leave after childbirth; assured access to high quality day care; and education for parenthood in public schools.

## PROTECTION OF YOUNG MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN AGAINST POVERTY

The first policy need is for measures to protect young mothers and their children against poverty. It is not single parenthood alone, but the poverty associated with it that accounts for much of the pathology in the children in such families. Compare the situation in the U.S. with that in Sweden. In the U.S., the typical public assistance grant provides an income well below the poverty line. Intended as a spur to work, the payment locks mothers into a cycle of dependency due to the fact that the earnings from the part-time, low-paying work available to them are confiscated. The payments offer nothing to parents who keep just above the poverty line. Health care coverage is variable and uncertain, as though our nation believes that children of indigent parents do not deserve health care. Medicaid covers half of the cost of health care at best. By contrast, in Sweden, payments to single mothers, in conjunction with day care, subsidized housing, and health insurance, provide a modestly decent standard of living. Swedish policy is designed to support high female labor force participation rates by continuing benefits at a generous level when women return to work. The married mother with a working husband remains far better off. What the policy does is avert destitution for single mothers. Such benefits must become the minimum goal of U.S. policy. The time is long overdue for a higher federal minimum wage and an extension of the Earned

Income Tax Credit for working families with children.

## PAID LEAVE FOR PARENTS.

The second policy calls for a federal legislation mandate of at least three months--and preferably up to six months--paid leave with guaranteed job protection for either the mother or father after the birth of an infant. Ours is the only Western industrialized country without such provisions. In 1990, President Bush vetoed an unpaid leave bill and the House of Representatives failed to overturn the veto. Even were parental leave available, not all mothers would use it; the important thing is to have options. When there is a father, and he prefers to be the one to stay home with the baby, that may be a welcome alternative.

## ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY CARE

The third element in a comprehensive child care policy is assured access to high quality infant and child day care. This requires federal standards mandating high quality care and federal subsidies. Infant day care of high quality is simply unaffordable, even for young mothers who earn the average full-time wage for their age group. A graduated system of subsidies could be indexed to family income in order to meet the expense of approved day care centers.

## EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD

The fourth element in a comprehensive policy is education for parenthood. Parents of the past learned by modeling themselves not only on their parents, but on uncles, aunts, and grandparents at home or nearby. As they grew up, they learned how to care for younger siblings because they were expected to. The isolated nuclear family and the sharp sequestration of age groups in today's society combine to deprive today's children of these experiences.

Under such circumstances, the acquisition of competence in parenting needs to be assured. I propose that child development centers be housed on junior high and high school campuses so that both male and female adolescents can care for young children and learn about child development under close supervision. Classroom exercises would parallel practical experiences in child care. Some will insist that we cannot afford new and costly federal initiatives. Let us instead ask, Can we afford not to?

Will these policies bring about a Golden Age of the Family? Clearly not. The most they can do is to cushion children against poverty. As society continues to evolve, so will the family. As the family changes, we will need to continue to monitor the state of our children.

This digest was adapted from the ERIC document WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY? by Leon Eisenberg, ED 325 222, 1990, 13 pp.

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