

## Towards an improved family stability

### Supporting parents through education

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Government, the academia and other stakeholders are keen to gather evidence to explain the various causes affecting the wellbeing of families and its members. Finding the roots of the current challenges can be definite or at least a huge step forward into tackling, before and in a more affordable way, social inclusion problems. The preventive approach of social challenges is usually an evidence-based strategy with long-term policies.

Research has demonstrated that parental divorce is correlated across cultures with higher rates of depression, suicide, anxiety, drug use [1], decreased academic performance, criminal activity [2], and health disorders including obesity and eating disorders in the children of the divorced couples. Additional studies have shown that a particularly high risk for divorce exists during the period immediately following the birth and bringing home of a new baby.

The examples of the studies conducted to analyze the effects of parental divorce are various and can be found in every region. In China, a study has shown that the socio-economic status of the family plays a pivotal role in the mental

The effectiveness of family policies and programmes depends on their regular assessment. That is where qualitative and quantitative research on family structures, needs, challenges and changing intergenerational relations are needed. Such research needs to focus on emerging trends and evaluate the impact of implemented policy measures on families.

In that context, family impact assessment studies, which seek to assess the impact of particular socioeconomic policies on families, are important. They have the potential to ensure that new policies effectively respond to the numerous challenges faced by families in a changing world.

[Report of the Secretary-General, Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes, A/73/61-E/2018/4, 27 July 2017–26 July 2018]

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health status of children and adolescents. Inadvertently, parents may expose children to these factors through situations they feel are out of their control or out of ignorance, for instance, by leaving home or letting their children be raised by other people. It has been shown that children and adolescents who live without parents exhibit higher levels of depressive symptoms than those with parents around them. [3]

Tests of simple effects have revealed in Singapore that adolescent boys from single-parent families were found to be significantly higher on suicidal ideation compared with adolescent boys from two-parent families. [4] Regarding health disorders including obesity and eating disorders, in sub-Saharan Africa data has shown that children from divorced couples experience significant health disadvantages relative to their peers with married parents. [5]

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Additionally, a study of urban youth in Finland showed that Depression was found to be more common among the offspring of divorced families than those in cohesive families. [6] A research conducted for youth in metropolitan Boston showed that parental divorce is linked with adolescent depression in two ways: (1) it is a source of numerous secondary problems and stresses that are causally related to depression; and (2) it alters youths' reactivity to these stresses, in some cases enhancing, but in other cases mitigating, their depressive effects. Economic hardship was also linked to depression, with a connection to divorce as a result of single-parent families due to financial stresses. Nevertheless, data failed to show that the differences between youths in single parent and intact families predate the divorce. [7]

In Uppsala (Sweden), a report has shown that depressed adolescents with separated parents had an excess risk of recurrence of depression in adulthood, compared with depressed adolescents with non-separated parents. In addition, among adolescents with depression, parental separation was associated with an increased risk of a switch to

bipolar disorder in adulthood. Among the matched non-depressed peers, no associations between parental separation and adult depression or bipolar disorder were found. [8]

A study motivated by the results of this research sponsored a six-month course for couples teaching them to navigate the reorganization of their household and relationship post-birth. Couples who participated in the course had measurably more stable marriages and better mental health following the birth of the baby than couples who did not complete the course. Similar studies regarding the results of marriage and parenting education courses yielded the same results, across cultures and geographical areas. [9]

Therefore, governments and social institutions should invest financial and other resources in making early parenting and relationship education courses widely accessible in order to invest in more stable family structures and the corresponding opportunities to reduce the issues described in below. [10]

## **Methodology**

To develop this position, data from across cultures regarding the use of marriage or couples' therapy, marriage education courses, and parenting educational courses was reviewed. When possible, specific research regarding the use of these methods in the context of new parent education on divorce rates in the period subsequent to the birth of the first child was evaluated.

For some geographical areas, this data was unavailable. Because the issues that challenge couples adjusting to the arrival of a new baby share certain facets in common, the effectiveness of these educational courses in a diverse range of cultural contexts can be extrapolated from the available data, with the acknowledgement that in cultures where psychology, therapy, or public discussion of family matters is not affirmed, the usage of a course may not be effective.

Data regarding the impact of divorce on child welfare in the Middle East and Asian countries was less available than data for Western, African, and eastern European countries. Data regarding the use of couples' therapy for couples bringing home a new baby was limited to studies conducted in the United States.

Most research centered on the bringing home of a new born child who was the biological child of the parents. Use of these courses in the context of adoption was not evaluated. Other research may be done in the future. Additionally, virtual participation in these courses is now feasible, but no data is available demonstrating the effectiveness of a virtual course.

### **Policy recommendations**

Governments should partner with local marriage or family psychologists or family not-for-profit organizations to host pilot programs across key demographic groups. The results and participant experiences should be evaluated one and two years after the courses to determine the impact of the course.

#### *Possible methods for administering courses*

In order to effectively reach parents and couples, governments should partner with local community institutions in which parents and couples are already active. Examples may include schools, churches, employers, or even, in some geographies, fitness centers.

The leadership of an international family organization based in the United States chose to partner with local churches by training church staff to present the courses. This approach was chosen strategically after determining that few couples would follow through in attending a course hosted by strangers at an unfamiliar location.

#### *Incentives for Participation*

Sponsoring institutions should charge a nominal fee for participation in the course or access to online educational materials because research has demonstrated that people value resources more when the individuals have made an investment, even a nominal one, in the resource.

Local, regional, or national governments may choose to reward couples who complete the course financially. Financial rewards vary from cash vouchers to tax benefits to reduced licensing fees for administrative paperwork. Sponsoring institutions should evaluate each of these options and choose that which best fits their circumstances, culture, and political context.

### *Course Format*

Current technology has made virtual coursework possible. Making pre-parenting education courses available online may be beneficial in allowing individuals, such as couples living in rural areas, who might otherwise not have access to the courses to participate.

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### ***"Parenting education courses will help some couples develop the skills necessary to prepare for the birth of their first child"***

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However, participants in studies on pre-parenting education courses identified one of the primary benefits of the courses as the opportunity to build friendships with and provide support to other couples in the same situation. While virtual resources may be a useful complement to in person educational courses, it is likely the virtual resources would not be sufficient to completely replace the in-person sessions.

### **Additional considerations**

#### *Opportunities for Additional Study*

Current research pre-dates technological developments that supports virtual classrooms and courses on demand. There is an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of these courses, particularly in the context of reaching working couples, low-income couples, or couples living in remote areas.

However, as described above, couples in previous studies indicated that the opportunity to interact and converse with other couples in similar situations was key to their positive experience with the course. It is possible the content of the courses is only one aspect of the studies and that, without the human interaction with other couples; the courses would not be as effective.

#### *Counterarguments*

The acceptance of third-party participation or training in the context of marriage and family varies across cultures. In cultures with very traditional

gender roles, male participation in preparation for childbirth and upbringing may not be widely accepted.

Additionally, couples bringing home a child through adoption may or may not be aided by these courses. Little research exists measuring the use of these courses in the context of adoption. Evolving and increasingly fluid concepts of family and romantic relationships may make defining the target participants and measuring the success rates of this project difficult.

Little data exists regarding the use of marriage preparation courses outside of the United States. Couples in marginalized groups, such as migrant couples and low-income couples may find it difficult to access educational courses due to financial or other constraints. It may be difficult to measure the impact of these courses for families living in extreme hardship because numerous sources of stress, violence, and poverty may correlate regardless of the courses. Some research has suggested that pre-marital counselling does not have a significant correlation to marital satisfaction. [11]

### Responses

Pre-parent courses are not the solution to all problems related to family instability, and, in certain contexts, may not even be helpful until more fundamental human needs are met. The fact that pre-parenting courses cannot solve all problems or reach all people should not be the basis for a conclusion that the courses are not worthwhile for those who can be positively influenced.

### Conclusion

The negative impact of divorce on children is now nearly universally accepted. Society also suffers the consequences, through increased crime rates and decreased well-being. Reducing these trends requires addressing what science has demonstrated to be one of their root causes – divorce. Effective solutions to the problem of divorce must address issues which separate couples pre-emptively.

Investing in parenting education courses will help some couples develop the skills necessary to prepare for the birth of their first child and successfully navigate the fragile period in their relationship which follows.

Partnering with established community institutions, such as schools, churches, and professional associations will allow these courses to reach the intended audiences through established structures, and thus improve the effectiveness of the courses.

Establishing on-demand parenting education programs and other online resources is an additional way to provide information to new parents, but should not be used in lieu of in person courses, which allow parents to build friendships and share experiences with each other.

In conjunction with other pro-family efforts, support and education for early parents is likely to reduce the divorce rate and build a brighter future for the youth and the nation.

[1] John P. Hoffmann, "Exploring the Direct and Indirect Family Effects on Adolescent Drug Use," *Journal of Drug Issues* 23, (1993): 535-557. Jeremy Arkes,

"The Temporal Effects of Parental Divorce on Youth Substance Use," *Substance Use & Misuse* 48, no. 3 (2013): 294, 296.

[2] Ryan D. Schroeder, Aurea K. Osgood, and Michael J. Oghia, "Family Transitions and Juvenile Delinquency," *Sociological Inquiry* 80, no. 4 (November 2010): 579, 596; Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A. K., & Matthijs, K. (n.d.). *Divorce, delinquent behaviour and substance use among adolescents: The role of parental characteristics*. Available at: <http://folk.uio.no/torkildl/divnet/Papers/Vanassche.pdf>

[3] Wang, Yan, Hui, & Juan, 2011. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305288905\\_DEPRESSION\\_AMONG\\_CHINESE\\_CHILDREN\\_AND\\_ADOLESCENTS\\_A\\_REVIEW\\_OF\\_THE\\_LITERATURE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305288905_DEPRESSION_AMONG_CHINESE_CHILDREN_AND_ADOLESCENTS_A_REVIEW_OF_THE_LITERATURE)

[4] Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.847.9132&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

[5] Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5589346/#s0010title>

[6] Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8919325>

[7] Available at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2137269?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2137269?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

[8] Available at: <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-017-1252-z>

[9] Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1744-6155.2001.tb00124.x>

[10] Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704099704576288954011675900>.