

## Why Vote for a Marriage Amendment? ...a *Child-rights Approach*.

Why do we need a marriage amendment? Years ago, when this debate was just taking shape, many people found it hard to understand the motive that was driving this. Same sex activist groups have been telling us that it was all about homophobia. And unfortunately there is probably some truth to this accusation. However, after peeling back the political rhetoric, there's actually a rather profound intellectual debate that looms below the surface. After all, any avid reader who has access to a broad spectrum of research would know that this debate has far less to do with same-sex rights than it does *child rights*.

Of course to talk of this as a *child rights* issue may surprise some. There have been numerous world-renown social scientists who have been instantly labeled as being "homophobes" for merely framing the child-rights aspect of this. Yet, for many of them, this political pejorative couldn't be further from the truth. Ironically many of these people are pro-gay even though they're pro-Marriage amendment. And the only reason why that statement seems like a contradiction to some is because this issue has been mistakenly framed as being a pro-gay vs. anti-gay issue. But we've got to get beyond these simplistic characterizations.

So this essay seeks to explore the following questions: What are the greater issues that loom behind this debate? Why is this a child-rights issue more than a gay-rights issue? And what are the implications of changing the legal definitions of marriage?

Thankfully there is an amazing amount a research asking the question: *What is it that creates healthy kids*. Or more specifically: ***What kinds of marriages affect child outcomes?***

Anyone who spends enough time reading family research is going to discover that there is an *overwhelming* amount of secular scientific research that's all saying the same thing: ***"A biological Father and Mother in a low-conflict marriage have a dramatic statistical advantage in creating positive child outcomes."*** I.e., a *high-conflict marriage*... or a *non-biological marriage*, or a *single parent* simply doesn't have the same statistical odds of creating positive child outcomes.

Of course, this doesn't mean: "If *you* are a single parent or miss *any* of these criteria, then just give up: cause there's no hope for you or your kids." On the contrary, many of these same studies are designed to help such parents become the statistical exceptions to the rule. At the same time, however, we can't live in denial of these facts simply because they make us feel bad about our parenting. And we certainly cannot allow both our guilt and our empathy to lead us to public policies that ignore the *preventative power* of this research. After all, the research is too broad and profound to ignore.

For example, there was a diverse team of scholars who wanted to make a joint statement on how married *biological parents affect child outcomes*. And keep in mind, this wasn't some biased study done by narrow-minded Christians. This was a group of scholars that came from the University of Texas, the University of Virginia, the University of Minnesota, the University of Chicago, the University of Maryland, the University of Washington, UC Berkeley, and Rutgers.

This diverse group found that when children live in the presence of their biological parents in a low-conflict marriage, they:

- live *longer & healthier lives* both physically and mentally.
- They do better in school.
- They're more likely to graduate and attend college.
- They're *less likely* to live in poverty.
- They're *less likely* to be in trouble with the law.
- They're less likely to drink or do drugs.
- They're less likely to be violent or sexually active.
- They're less likely to be victims of sexual or physical violence.
- They're *more* likely to have successful marriage when they are older." <sup>1</sup>

And as a point of clarification: These same benefits simply do not hold up as often for (1) Biological parents who are in constant conflict. It also doesn't stack up well for (2). Cohabiting parents... These benefits are also less likely for (3). Non-biological parents... and for (4). Single parents. Of course, the goal of this research is not to condemn anyone who falls into the list above. Indeed, there are statistical *protective factors* that can help people become the exceptions to the rule. Yet lawmakers would be foolish to ignore research like this – especially when studies like this are incredibly plentiful.

Of course, some sex activist groups have accused this research as being isolated or inaccurate. But scholars within the social sciences know that this accusation isn't intellectually honest. These studies are not isolated nor partisan. In fact, at the end of this article, we footnoted 32 other studies that say the same thing. Thus, in this debate, it's important to not trust in an isolated study. Much like health-food legislation we must look at the *breadth* of studies – not the isolated fabrication of an activist group.

Keep in mind: Similar debates in marriage legislation aren't new. In fact, in the 1960's and 70's there was a similar legislative agenda that swept over states regarding "no-fault" divorce laws. (I.e., some people wanted to make divorce easier). And that's exactly what state legislatures did. As a result divorces have skyrocketed. And we'd be hard-pressed to find a social scientist of any repute who would deny the impact that this has had upon both our economic and social health.

Divorce now costs our country around \$30 billion every year – and this number easily exceeds \$100 billion once we add up the costs of all the social programs necessary to compensate for divorce. There are now more single-parent homes in the U.S. than ever in our nation's history – which again creates a massive impact upon our economy. Children are now participating in an unprecedented amount of risky behaviors (from drugs to gang violence). And all of this can be statistically traced to *marriage* and the legislative catalysts that have enhanced this situation. So, when this legislative *cause and effect* has become so clear through the research, why again, would we want to broaden the legal definition of marriage?

Today this discussion of marriage happens to manifest itself in the debate on Gay-marriage. But in some ways, the deeper debate is actually about *Child Rights vs. Adult Freedom Rights*. Certainly, we can empathize with a person's desire to get an "easy divorce." We can also deeply empathize with a person's desire for gay-marriage; yet, at

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr\\_doc/05\\_FOC\\_15-2\\_fall05\\_Amato.pdf](http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/05_FOC_15-2_fall05_Amato.pdf)

*the same time*, it seems like a classic example of the tension between *personal freedoms* and the *greater good*.

For example, consider the issue of smoking: Nobody wants to be the irritating person telling a smoker: "*You can't smoke here! You must smoke there! ... You've got to have a warning from the surgeon-general on every tobacco related advertisement!*" You see: Nobody wants to be a kill-joy. Even more: there are many wonderful people who smoke. But keep in mind: Over 600,000 people still died from second-hand smoke last year; thus, the data forces us to legislate for the greater good. The desire in us to "*help our smoker-friends feel good*" has to be secondary to the greater societal good.

Do I want to tell my neighbor: "*You can't let your small child sit in an airbag seat! You can't ignore child-booster seats ... you've got to make them wear seat-belts!*" Again nobody wants to be the irritating neighbor who tells others what to do. But, the research *obligates us* to concede: we need to have clear safety laws. I.e., There are times when personal freedoms must be trumped.

And the Defense of Marriage amendments works the same way: If we broaden the legal definition of marriage, we are amplifying the very circumstances that research proves (over and over) results in poor child outcomes. For example, the marriage legislation in the 1970's dramatically increased the number of single parent homes, which dramatically increased a laundry list of negative child outcomes. Researchers have shown over and over that everything from gang violence to teen suicide rates have increased in direct proportion to loosening marriage legislation. Ironically, kids who come from "non-traditional marriages" tend to bully other kids *more than* those who come from a low-conflict biological family. I.e., We are making a cultural decision to embrace significant negative child outcomes (which will directly decrease health and quality of life for 10-20% of the population) for a group that, at the very highest, represents 3% of the population. (Only roughly .12% of the same sex population has kids.) Thus, it has led secular family researchers to question whether we have fully understood the statistical implications of modifying the definition and scope of marriage.

So, why then, do so many people want to broaden the definition of marriage? Quite simply it's because we all know that homophobia is alive and well in the U.S. There are all sorts of hate crimes that need to be confronted. Another phenomenon is something researchers are calling "Marriage-Phobia."

As marriages have gotten increasingly unhealthy in the last 30 years, people's fear of marriage has also grown. Some researchers are now postulating that there is also an increase in the collective guilt we carry as a culture toward marriage. I.e., We feel increasingly guilty about how we handle our own marriages. Thus, we have a harder time embracing the research on traditional marriage. I.e., It's easier to look at the research on second-hand smoke and child-seat-belts because *that data* doesn't hold a mirror to our own marriages.

So, before you form your own opinion on marriage legislation, don't merely look at it from the rights of the same-sex community. Evaluate the issue from a child-rights standpoint. After doing so, you may still vote "no" for an amendment. But the impact of the legislation better be considered. Or, the behavior problems of the future generations may be only picking up steam.

***For Further Research:***

Here are numerous studies that corroborate the traditional definition of marriage.

- Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60 (1998): 527-536;
- David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children*, (New York, The Free Press, 1997)
- Glenn T. Stanton *Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society*, (Colorado Springs, Pinon Press, 1997)
- W. Bradford Wilcox, et al., *Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005)
- Paul Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," in *The Future of Children, "Marriage and Child Wellbeing,"* Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 2005, (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and The Brookings Institution)
- Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, (New York Doubleday, 200)
- Katherine Reissman and Naomi Gerstel, "Marital Dissolution and Health: Do Males or Females Have Greater Risk?" *Social Science and Medicine* 20 (1985): 627-635
- Robert Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations* 40 (1991) 97-102
- George A. Akerlof, "Men Without Children," *The Economic Journal* 108 (1998) 287-309
- Ronald P. Rohner and Robert A. Veneziano, "The Importance of Father Love: History and Contemporary Evidence," *Review of General Psychology* 5.4 (2001): 382-405
- Kyle D. Pruett, *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*, (New York: The Free Press, 2000)
- David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994)
- Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994)
- Deborah Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 573-584
- Scott Coltrane, "Father-Child Relationships and the Status of Women: A Cross-Cultural Study," *American Journal of Sociology*, 93 (1988) p. 1088
- Jan Stets, "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: the Role of Social Isolation," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 669-680
- Michael Gordon, "The Family Environment of Sexual Abuse: A Comparison of Natal and Stepfather Abuse," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 13 (1985): 121-130
- Michael Stiffman, et al., "Household Composition and Risk of Fatal Child Maltreatment," *Pediatrics*, 109 (2002), 615-621
- Frank Putnam, "Ten Year Research Update Review: Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 42 (2003) 269-279
- Richard Koestner, et al., "The Family Origins of Empathic Concern: A Twenty-Six Year Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58 (1990): 709-717

- E. Mavis Hetherington, "Effects of Father Absence on Personality Development in Adolescent Daughters," *Developmental Psychology* 7 (1972): 313 –326
- Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1986), pp. 30-31
- Sara L. McLanahan, "Life Without Father: What Happens to Children?" Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #01-21. Princeton University, August 15, 2001
- Paul R. Amato and Fernando Rivera, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 375-384
- David Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 46
- Ronald J. Angel and Jacqueline Worobey, "Single Motherhood and Children's Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 29 (1988): 38-52;
- L. Remez, "Children Who Don't Live with Both Parents Face Behavioral Problems," *Family Planning Perspectives*, January/February 1992
- Judith Wallerstein, et al., *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, (New York: Hyperion, 2000)
- Nicholas Zill, Donna Morrison, and Mary Jo Coiro, "Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce on Parent-Child Relationships, Adjustment, and Achievement in Young Adulthood," *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7 (1993):91-103.
- James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002)
- Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60 (1998): 527-536
- Chris Wilson and Andrew Oswald, "How Does Marriage Affect Physical and Psychological Health? A Survey of the Longitudinal Evidence," currently unpublished paper from the University of Warwick, May 2005, p. 13. (paper accessed at <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/faculty/oswald/healthlong2005.pdf>)