

## WHY DO CHILDREN NEED MARRIED PARENTS?

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### Making a Case for Marriage

*Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage*

#### The Situation

- As of 2004, 68% of children lived with two married parents. (“Family Structure and Children’s Living Arrangements,” Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, <http://childstats.gov/amchildren05/pop6.asp>)
- In 2004, 23% of children lived with only their mothers, 5% lived with only their fathers, and 4% lived with neither of their parents. (“Family Structure...”)
- Only 45% of all teenage children live with their married biological parents. (“The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts,” Patrick Fagan, [www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm))
- Children in single-parent families comprise 27% of all American children, yet they account for 62% of all poor children. (“The Positive Effects...”)
- The three most significant reasons children are raised without their married mother and father are unwed pregnancy, cohabitation, and divorce. (“The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America 2006,” David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, National Marriage Project, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu> print version p.33)

#### Social Science on the Benefits that Marriage Provides to Children

- Children raised in intact married families are more likely to attend college, are physically and emotionally healthier, are less likely to be physically or sexually abused, less likely to use drugs or alcohol and to commit delinquent behaviors, have a decreased risk of divorcing when they get married, are less likely to become pregnant/impregnate someone as a teenager, and are less likely to be raised in poverty. (“Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences,” Bradford Wilcox, Institute for American Values, [www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html](http://www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html))
- Children receive gender specific support from having a mother and a father. Research shows that particular roles of mothers (e.g., to nurture) and fathers (e.g., to discipline), as well as complex biologically rooted interactions, are important for the development of boys and girls. (“Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles,” 2006, [www.princetonprinciples.org](http://www.princetonprinciples.org))

- A child living with a single mother is 14 times more likely to suffer serious physical abuse than is a child living with married biological parents. A child whose mother cohabits with a man other than the child's father is 33 times more likely to suffer serious physical child abuse. ("The Positive Effects...")
  - In married families, about 1/3 of adolescents are sexually active. However, for teenagers in stepfamilies, cohabiting households, divorced families, and those with single unwed parents, the percentage rises above 1/2. ("The Positive Effects...")
  - Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the chance that children themselves will divorce or become unwed parents. ("26 Conclusions..." and "Marriage and the Public Good...")
- \* Children of divorce experience lasting tension as a result of the increasing differences in their parents' values and ideas. At a young age they must make mature decisions regarding their beliefs and values. Children of so called "good divorces" fared worse emotionally than children who grew up in an unhappy but "low-conflict" marriage. ("Ten Findings from a National Study on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Children of Divorce," Elizabeth Marquardt, [www.betweenworlds.org](http://www.betweenworlds.org))

#### Church Teaching and Pastoral Response

- There are two inseparable ends of marriage: the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children. The education of children in faith, love, and wisdom is a vital task of married parental love (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2249; *Guadium et Spes* #50).
- At the 2006 World Meeting of Families, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that the love of a mother and father provides security for children and educates them about the beauty of faithful and eternal love.  
[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/july/documents/hf\\_benxvi\\_spe\\_20060708\\_incontro-festivo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/july/documents/hf_benxvi_spe_20060708_incontro-festivo_en.html)
- Pope John Paul II spoke of parents as co-creators and educators, highlighting the fundamental example of self-giving love and personal communion that married parents supply to their children. Married parents present children with their first experiences of the love of God and the Church. ("Familiaris Consortio," #36-38)
- The U.S. Bishops have addressed the value of married parents for children's well-being and Christian formation: "...we support and applaud the often heroic efforts of single-parent families. We also emphasize the value of parents staying together and sacrificing to raise children. Children generally do best when they have the love and support - personal and material - of both their parents." ("Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation, and World," 1991)
- The U.S. Bishops have pointed out that a committed marriage is the foundation of a family. "It strengthens all the members, provides best for the needs of children, and causes the church of the home to be an effective sign of Christ in the world" ("Follow the

Way of Love,” 1994). Nearly a decade later the bishops reaffirmed this point, stating that the stable, loving relationship of a mother and father—present only in marriage—provides the best conditions for raising children (“Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same-Sex Unions,” 2003)

## Conclusion

Social science research shows clear advantages when children are raised by two married parents. This does not diminish the exemplary efforts of many single parents, whose “courage and determination” the U.S. Bishops recognized in “Follow the Way of Love” (p. 10). It does, however, encourage pastoral leaders to promote loving, faithful and committed marriages as the best gift that parents can give to their children.