



## **Marriage-Plus**

By Theodora Ooms

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The public has been concerned about "family breakdown" for a long time, but it was not until the passage of welfare reform in 1996 that the federal government decided to get into the business of promoting marriage. Although it was little noticed at the time, three of the four purposes of the welfare legislation refer directly or indirectly to marriage and family formation. The law exhorts states to promote "job preparation, work and marriage," to "prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies," and to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."

The Bush administration, as it contemplates this year's extension of welfare legislation, plans to make marriage even more central. The administration's reauthorization proposal, announced February 27, includes \$300 million for demonstration grants to focus on promoting healthy marriages and reducing out-of-wedlock births.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating has launched a \$10-million, multisector marriage initiative, and other smaller-scale government-sponsored initiatives have been enacted in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan,

and Utah. The federal government is primarily concerned with reducing out-of-wedlock births, which it views as a principal cause of welfare dependency and a host of other social problems. By contrast, state marriage initiatives are most concerned about the effects of high divorce rates and father absence on children.<sup>2</sup>

This new emphasis on marriage as a panacea for social problems is troubling to many liberals. For one thing, it risks being dismissive of children who happen to find themselves in single-parent families. It also can be seen as disparaging single mothers and ignoring the fact that many women have left abusive marriages for good reasons.

That said, it's hard to dismiss an overwhelming consensus of social-science research findings that children tend to be better off, financially and emotionally, when their parents are married to each other. Around 50 percent of all first marriages are expected to end in divorce, and 60 percent of all divorces involve children. One-third of all births are out of wedlock, nearly 40 percent of children do not live with their biological fathers, and too many nonresident fathers neither support nor see their children on a regular basis.

Children living with single mothers are five times as likely to be poor as those in two-parent families. Growing up in a single-parent family also roughly doubles the risk that a child will drop out of school, have difficulty finding a job, or become a teen parent. About half of these effects appear to be attributable to the reduced income available to single parents, but the other half is due to non-economic factors.<sup>3</sup> It's not just the presence of two adults in the home that helps children, as some argue. Children living with cohabiting partners and in stepfamilies generally do less well than those living with both married biological parents.<sup>4</sup>

Marriage also brings benefits to husbands and wives. Married adults are more productive on the job, earn more, save more, have better physical and mental health, and live longer, according to an extensive review of research, conducted by scholar Linda Waite. Although Waite admits that these findings partly reflect the selection of better-adjusted people into marriage, she finds that when people marry, they act in more health-promoting and productive ways.<sup>5</sup>

Conservatives are prone to exaggerate these research findings and underplay the importance of economics. If married people are more likely (other things being equal) to produce thriving children, other things are not, in fact, equal. It's not just the case that single mothers find themselves poor because they are unmarried; they find themselves unmarried because they are poor. Successful marriages are more difficult when husbands and wives are poorly educated, lack access to jobs that pay decently, and cannot afford decent child care. Economic hardship and other problems associated with poverty can wreak havoc on couples' relationships.

The controversy mostly isn't about research, however, but about values.<sup>6</sup> Most people regard decisions to marry, divorce, and bear children as intensely private. Any policy proposals that hint at coercing people to marry, reinforcing Victorian conceptions of gender roles, or limiting the right to end bad marriages are viewed as counter to American values of individual autonomy and privacy. Some worry about the existence of hidden agendas that threaten to put women back into the kitchen, ignore domestic violence, and eliminate public assistance for low-income families. Others fear that holding out marriage as the ideal blames single parents, many of whom do a terrific job under difficult circumstances. Use of the term "illegitimate" is

especially offensive because it stigmatizes children (and, in fact, is legally inaccurate, as children born outside of marriage now have virtually the same legal rights as those born within marriage).<sup>7</sup>

And some worry that the pro-marriage agenda discriminates against ethnic and sexual minorities and their children, particularly gays and lesbians.

There are also more pragmatic concerns. Skeptics of the pro-marriage agenda observe that the decline in marriage is worldwide, a result of overwhelming social and economic forces that cannot be reversed. In their view, attempts to change family formation behavior are largely futile; we should instead just accept and help support the increasing diversity of family forms. For others, the concern is less about the value of promoting marriage and more about whether government, rather than individuals, communities, or faith institutions, should lead the charge.

Finally, marriage per se is too simplistic a solution to the complex problems of the poor. Marrying a low-income, unmarried mother to her child's father will not magically raise the family out of poverty when the parents often have no skills, no jobs, terrible housing, and may be struggling with depression, substance abuse, or domestic violence. Advocates also worry that funds spent on untested marriage-promotion activities will be taken away from programs that provide desperately needed services for single parents, such as child care.

In response to some of these concerns—as well as research showing that serious parental conflict harms children—some marriage advocates respond that marriage per se should not be the goal but rather voluntary, “healthy” marriages.<sup>8</sup> They also agree that protections should be built into programs to guard against domestic violence. But this only raises doubts

about how “healthy” will be defined, and by whom, and whether we even know how to help people create better relationships.

There also are some plainly foolish ideas in the marriage movement. West Virginia currently gives married families an extra \$100 a month in welfare payments as a “marriage incentive.” Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation has proposed giving a \$4,000 government bounty to welfare recipients who marry before they have a child and stay married for two years.<sup>9</sup> Charles Murray wants to end public assistance altogether and has proposed eliminating all aid to *unmarried* mothers under 21 in one state to test the idea. This proposal is especially egregious and surely would harm children of single mothers.<sup>10</sup>

Progressives and others thus are placed in a quandary. They don’t want to oppose marriage—which most Americans still value highly—but are skeptical of many pro-marriage initiatives. Given that healthy marriage is plainly good for children, however, one can envision a reasonable agenda—one that would gain broad support—that we might call Marriage-Plus. This approach puts the well-being of children first by helping more of them grow up in married, healthy, two-parent families. However, for many children, the reality is that marriage is not a feasible or even a desirable option for their parents. Thus, a secondary goal is to help these parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—cooperate better in raising their children. These are not alternative strategies. Children need us to do both.

A marriage-plus agenda does not promote marriage just for marriage’s sake. It acknowledges that married and unmarried parents, mothers and fathers, may need both economic resources and non-economic supports to increase the likelihood of stable, healthy marriages and better co-parenting relationships. In addition, a marriage-plus agenda focuses

more on the front end—making marriage better to be in—rather than the back end—making marriage more difficult to get out of.

Here are some elements of this agenda.

**Strengthen “fragile families” at the birth of a child.** For many poor families, relationship-education programs may be helpful but not enough. A new national study finds that at the time of their child’s birth, one-half of unmarried parents (so-called “fragile families”) are living together, and another third are romantically attached but not cohabiting.<sup>11</sup> The majorities of these parents are committed to each other and to their child and have high hopes of eventual marriage and a future together—although these hopes too often are not realized. We should reach out to young parents to help them achieve their desire to remain together as a family. A helpful package of services to offer these young families might include a combination of “soft” services—relationship-skills and marriage-education workshops, financial-management classes, and peer-support groups—and “hard” services, such as job training and placement, housing, medical coverage, and substance-abuse treatment, if necessary. At present, all we do is get the father to admit paternity and hound him for child support.

**Reduce economic stress by reducing poverty.** Poverty and unemployment can stress couples’ relationships to their breaking point. Results of a welfare-to-work demonstration program in Minnesota suggest that enhancing the income of the working poor can indirectly promote marriage. The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), which subsidized the earnings of employed welfare families, found that marriage rates increased for both single-parent long-term recipients and two-parent families. Married two-parent families were significantly more likely to remain married. MFIP also reduced the reported incidence of domestic abuse.<sup>12</sup>

**Provide better-paying jobs and job assistance for the poor.** The inability of low-skilled, unemployed men to provide income to their families is a major reason for their failure to marry the mothers of their children. Better employment opportunities help low-income fathers, and men in general, to become responsible fathers and, perhaps, more attractive and economically stable marriage partners.<sup>13</sup> There is also growing support for making changes in the child-support system to ensure that more support paid by fathers goes to the children (rather than being used to recoup government program costs).<sup>14</sup>

**Invest more in proven programs that reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing.** Teen pregnancy and birth rates have fallen by over 20 percent since the early 1990s, and there is now strong evidence that a number of prevention programs are effective. A related strategy is enforcement of child support. States that have tough, effective child support systems have been found to have lower nonmarital birth rates, presumably because men are beginning to understand there are serious costs associated with fathering a child.<sup>15</sup>

**Institute workplace policies to reduce work/family conflict and stress on couples.** Stress in the workplace spills over into the home. Persistent overtime, frequent travel, and inflexible leave policies place great strain on couples at all income levels. Employers are increasingly demanding nonstandard work schedules. A recent study found that married couples with children who work night and rotating shifts are at higher risk of separation and divorce.<sup>16</sup> The absence of affordable and reliable child care forces many parents who would prefer a normal workday to working split shifts solely to make sure that a parent is home with children.

**Reduce tax penalties and other disincentives to marriage.** There has always been strong support for reducing marriage tax penalties for many two-earner families. This is a

complicated task because the majority of married couples, in fact, receive tax bonuses rather than penalties.<sup>17</sup> A positive step was taken in 2001 to reduce significantly the marriage penalty affecting low-income working families in the Earned Income Tax Credit program. While there is uncertainty about the extent to which these tax-related marriage penalties affect marital behavior, there is broad general agreement that government has a responsibility to “first do no harm” when it comes to marriage.

Similarly, there is near unanimous agreement that government should not make it harder for eligible two-parent families to receive welfare benefits and assistance. In the past, the old welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, was much criticized for offering incentives to break up families. At least 33 states already have removed the stricter eligibility rules placed on two-parent families,<sup>18</sup> and the President’s welfare reauthorization proposal encourages the other states to do the same. In addition, it proposes to end the higher work participation rate for two-parent families, a federal rule that has been criticized widely by the states. Another needed reform would forgive accumulated child-support debt owed by noncustodial fathers if they marry the mothers of their children. (Currently, such debt is owed to the state if the mothers and children are receiving welfare benefits.)<sup>19</sup>

**Educate those who *want* to marry and stay married about how to have healthy relationships and good marriages.** A vast industry is devoted to helping couples plan a successful wedding day—wedding planners, 500-page bridal guides, specialty caterers, the list goes on. But where do young people go to learn about how to sustain good, lifelong marriages? In fact, we now know a lot about what makes contemporary marriages work. With the transformation of gender roles, there now are fewer fixed rules for couples to follow, meaning



they have to negotiate daily about who does what and when. In the absence of the legal and social constraints that used to keep marriages together, there's now a premium on developing effective relationship skills. Building on three decades of research, there are a small but rapidly growing number of programs (both religious and secular) that help people from high school through adulthood understand the benefits of marriage for children and for themselves, develop realistic expectations for healthy relationships, understand the meaning of commitment, and learn the skills and attitudes needed to make marriage succeed.<sup>20</sup> Other programs help married couples survive the inevitable ups and downs that occur in most marriages, and remarried couples with the additional challenges of step-parenting. Oklahoma, Utah, and Michigan have begun using government funds to make these relationship- and marriage-education programs accessible to low-income couples. The Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy initiative is urging area businesses to include marriage education as an Employee Assistance Program benefit, arguing that it's more cost-effective to prevent marital distress than incur the costs of counseling and lost productivity involved when employees' marriages break up.<sup>21</sup>

A marriage-plus agenda that includes activities such as these is not just the responsibility of government. Some of the strategies proposed here are being implemented by private and religious groups, some by governments, and some by partnerships between these sectors. The approach adopted in Oklahoma, Greater Grand Rapids, and Chattanooga, for example, mobilizes the resources of many sectors of the community—government, education, legal, faith, business, and media—in a comprehensive effort to create a more marriage-supportive culture and to provide new services to promote, support, and strengthen couples and marriage and reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and divorce. This “saturation model” seems particularly

promising because it takes into account the many factors that influence individuals' decisions to marry, to divorce, or to remain unmarried. We should proceed cautiously, trying out and evaluating new ideas before applying them widely.

Ironically, in the midst of this furor about government's role in marriage, it's worth noting that the federal government recently has begun to shirk a basic responsibility: counting the numbers of marriages and divorces in the United States. Since budget cuts in 1995, the government has been unable to report on marriage and divorce rates in the states or for the nation as a whole.<sup>22</sup> And, for the first time in the history of the Census, Americans were not asked to give their marital status in the 2000 survey. What kind of pro-marriage message from the government is that?

If liberals and conservatives are serious about strengthening families for the sake of helping children, liberals ought to acknowledge that noncoercive and egalitarian approaches to bolstering marriage are sound policy. Conservatives, meanwhile, should admit that much of what it takes to make marriage work for the benefit of spouses and children is not just moral but economic.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Working Toward Independence: The President's Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform*, February 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/welfare-reform-announcement-book.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Theodora Ooms, "The Role of the Federal Government in Strengthening Marriage," in *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law*, Volume 9, Issue 1, Fall 2002. To be posted on [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).

<sup>3</sup> Sara McLanahan and Julien Teitler, "The Consequences of Father Absence" in Micheal E. Lamb (Ed.), *Parenting and Child Development in "Non-Traditional" Families*. Mahwah, NJ:Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1998. Also see Sara McLanahan and Gary Sanderfur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

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- <sup>4</sup> See McLanahan and Teitler, *supra* note 3; Susan L. Brown, “Child Well-Being in Cohabiting Unions” and Wendy D. Manning, “The Implications of Cohabitation for Children’s Well-Being,” in Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation for Children, Families and Social Policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2002
- <sup>5</sup> Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- <sup>6</sup> Theodora Ooms, *Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda*. Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar, 1998. Available from [tooms@clasp.org](mailto:tooms@clasp.org).
- <sup>7</sup> Ruth-Arlene W. Howe, “Legal Rights and Obligations: An Uneven Evolution,” in Robert I. Lerman and Theodora Ooms (Eds.), *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Role and Emerging Policies* (pp. 141-169). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Robin Toner, “Welfare Chief is Hoping to Promote Marriage,” *New York Times*, front page, February 19, 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Rector, *A Plan to Reduce Illegitimacy*, memorandum handed out at a meeting on Capitol Hill in early 2001.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Murray, “Family Formation,” in Rebecca M. Blank and Ron Haskins (Eds.), *The New World of Welfare* (pp. 137-168). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001.
- <sup>11</sup> Sara McLanahan et al., *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Baseline Report*, August 2001, <http://crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/nationalreport.pdf>; and Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, and Ronald B. Mincy, “Fragile Families, Welfare Reform, and Marriage,” *Welfare Reform and Beyond Policy Brief*, No.10, November, 2001. <http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/wrb/publications/pb/pb10.htm>. For additional papers from the Fragile Families study, see <http://crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm>
- <sup>12</sup> Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, and Lisa A. Gennetian, *Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: A Summary of the Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, September, 2000.
- <sup>13</sup> See chapter 4, “The Fading Inner-City Family,” in William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (pp. 87-110). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996; Kathy Edin, “Few Good Men: Why Poor Mothers Don’t Marry or Remarry,” *The American Prospect*, January 3, 2000.
- <sup>14</sup> See Vicki Turetsky, Testimony given to the Social Security and Family Policy Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee, October 11, 2001, and Vick Turetsky, *What if All the Money Came Home?* Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, June, 2000. Both available on line at [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).
- <sup>15</sup> Robert D. Plotnick, Inhoe Ku, Irwin Garfinkel, and Sara S. McLanahan, *The Impact of Child Support Enforcement Policy on Nonmarital Childbearing*. Paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Year 2000 Research Conference in Seattle, WA.
- <sup>16</sup> Harriet B. Presser, “Nonstandard Work Schedules and Marital Instability,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 62, No. 1, February, 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *For Better or For Worse: Marriage and the Federal Income Tax*. Washington, DC: Congress of the United States, Congressional Budget Office, June, 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> Gene Falk and Jill Tauber. *Welfare Reform: TANF Provisions Related to Marriage and Two-Parent Families*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. October 30, 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Roberts, *An Ounce of Prevention and A Pound of Cure: Developing State Policy on the Payment of Child Support Arrears by Low Income Parents*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, May, 2001. Available on line at [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).
- <sup>20</sup> See Scott Stanley, “Making a Case for Premarital Education,” in *Family Relations*, Vol. 50, No. 3, July 2001. Also see *Directory of Couples and Marriage Education Programs* at [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)
- <sup>21</sup> Personal communication with Mark Eastburg, Ph.D., director of Pine Rest Family Institute, Grand Rapids, Michigan. See website for the Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Initiative, [www.ggrcmarriagepolicy.org](http://www.ggrcmarriagepolicy.org)
- <sup>22</sup> Stephanie Ventura, “Vital Statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics,” in Douglas Besharov (Ed.), *Data Needs for Measuring Family and Fertility Change after Welfare Reform*. College Park, MD: Maryland School of Public Affairs, Welfare Reform Academy.