

# PURPOSEFUL PARENTHOOD

## BETTER PLANNING BENEFITS NEW PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

**Fifty years ago, in 1965**, Daniel Patrick Moynihan presciently warned that the breakdown of the family was becoming a key source of disadvantage in the African American community. He received intense criticism at the time. Yet the trends he identified have not gone away. Indeed, they have “trickled up” to encompass not just a much larger fraction of the African American community but a large swath of the white community as well. Still, the racial gaps remain large. The proportion of black children born outside marriage was 72 percent in 2012, while the white proportion was 36 percent (see “Was Moynihan Right?” *features*, Spring 2015, Figure 2).

The effects on children of the increase in single parents is no longer much debated. They do less well in school, are less likely to graduate, and are more likely to be involved in crime, teen pregnancy, and other behaviors that make it harder to succeed in life. Not every child raised by a single parent will suffer from the experience, but, on average, a lone parent has fewer resources—both time and money—with which to raise a child. Poverty rates for single-parent families are five times those for married-parent families (see “Was Moynihan Right?” *features*, Spring 2015, Figure 4). The growth of such families

since 1970 has increased the overall child poverty rate by about 5 percentage points (from 20 to 25 percent).

Rates of social mobility are also lower for these families. Harvard researcher Raj Chetty and his colleagues find that the incidence of single parenthood in a community is one of the most powerful predictors of geographic differences in social mobility in the United States. And our research at the Brookings Institution also shows that social mobility is much higher for the children of continuously married parents than for those who grow up with discontinuously married or never-married parents. Moynihan was especially concerned about the large number of boys growing up in “broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future....” Recent research suggests that boys are indeed more affected than girls by the lack of a male role model in the family. If true, this sets the stage for a cycle of poverty in which mother-headed families produce boys who go on to father their own children outside marriage.

But what does all of this have to do with education? Rates of unwed childbearing and divorce are much lower among

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well-educated than among less-educated women. The proportion of first births that occur outside of marriage is only 12 percent for those who are college graduates but 58 percent for everyone else. So more and better education is one clear path to reducing unwed parenthood and the growth of single-parent families in the future.

### Why Does Education Matter?

Education clearly improves the economic prospects of men and women, making them more marriageable. But the commonly heard argument that the declining economic prospects of men are the culprit in this story about unwed births is too simple. It doesn't explain why some young adults feel they are too poor to marry but believe they can afford to raise a child. Or why marriage was so much more prevalent in an earlier era, when everyone had fewer resources.

One reason that education may help to increase marriage rates is that the better-educated tend to have more egalitarian gender roles, which makes marriage more appealing, especially to women. For women who work outside the home, flexible parenting arrangements help them avoid having to "do it all" and the resentment that engenders.

Finally, and critically, in my view, the better-educated are

### Education Out of School

While education is critically important, if we focus only on what can be done during the schooling years to improve educational outcomes, we will likely fail. Not all human-capital development occurs in a classroom; some of it occurs in the home. Children from underprivileged backgrounds typically start school way behind their more-fortunate peers. These gaps tend to persist as children move through school and pose enormous challenges to teachers and other school personnel. We need to focus attention on what happens to a child long before he or she starts school.

Starting earlier means focusing on what occurs before a child enters any form of schooling, including a pre-K program. Let's call the prior period pre-pre-K, a term coined by my colleague Richard Reeves. It spans from infancy through toddlerhood. During this period, development is rapid, and the home environment looms large. The quality of parenting matters a lot. Some parenting or home-visiting programs have improved the quality of parenting and thus a child's later outcomes, including readiness for school. But not all such programs are effective, and they face an uphill struggle: the evidence suggests that class differences in parenting styles are growing, rather than diminishing.

The developmental stage prior to infancy is the prenatal period, from conception to birth. Scientists have just begun to



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much more successful at avoiding the arrival of a baby before they are in a committed relationship and ready to be parents. An unwed birth, not divorce, is now the most common entry point into single parenthood. Although the mother may be living with the child's father at the time of the birth, these cohabiting relationships are very fragile. By the time the child is age five, about half of cohabiting parents will have split up. More education sharply reduces the drifting into unstable relationships and the single parenthood that this often produces.

The relationship between education and the ability to plan a family goes in both directions. If young adults had more education, there would be less drifting and fewer unwed births. And if there were better family planning, young people could finish their schooling. There would then be more purposeful parenthood, more children ready for school when they enroll, and, later on, better-educated young adults making better parenting decisions of their own.

diagram the underlying mechanics, but the consequences of events during pregnancy are numerous and clear. In a study published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, for example, the most anxious 15 percent of participating mothers were twice as likely to deliver children with behavioral concerns like ADHD; the effect remained even after controlling for the mothers' postnatal stress. Another study found that prenatally stressed nine-year-olds have less gray-matter density in regions associated with cognitive function. David Figlio, with three other researchers, has examined the effects of prenatal health on school success, using 14,000 pairs of Florida twins. The twins with lower birth weights, a proxy for worse prenatal health, scored consistently lower on reading and math tests through 8th grade. The twins' gender, race, and socioeconomic class did not change the results, nor did their schools' quality.

Further upstream still are the circumstances of the parents-to-be. Have they finished school? Are they emotionally mature and financially independent? Did they choose to have children



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with someone they can envision living with in a committed relationship for the time it takes to raise the child? Did they plan to have the child? In short, are they reasonably well prepared to take on the most important task any adult ever undertakes?

In *Generation Unbound*, I show that a large fraction of young adults are “drifting” into sex and parenthood without having thought very much, if at all, about these questions. About half of new parents under 30 are unmarried (although

often in cohabiting relationships). Among these unmarried parents-to-be, more than 70 percent began the pregnancy unintentionally, according to their own reports. Many are still in school (either high school or college); 21 percent of nonmarital births are to women under age 20.

When unmarried parents are asked why they haven’t married, many say that it is because they can’t “afford” to. Why they think it takes less money to raise a child than to marry is a major puzzle. It seems that marriage, while still celebrated in the abstract, is viewed as a distant goal—the capstone not the cornerstone of a successful life, as Johns Hopkins professor Andrew Cherlin notes. In the meantime, children are being raised in environments marked by inadequate resources and unstable relationships. No wonder that when they get to school, children are often not ready to learn. Schools are asked to compensate for the failure of children’s first teachers—their parents—to instill in them the attitudes and habits, the love of learning, and the ability to interact constructively with others that success in school requires.

### Reconnecting Marriage and Parenting

Can we encourage more planning and less drifting among young adults and perhaps bring back marriage, or at least a long-term committed relationship, as the standard precursor to bearing and raising children in the U.S.?

No one knows. According to some, there is a dearth of so-called marriageable men, defined as those who are employed. But there is an even greater dearth of marriageable women, defined as not having children from a previous relationship: using these metrics, there are only 62 marriageable women for every 100 marriageable men. But there are reasons to be optimistic and reasons to be pessimistic about the future.

On the optimistic side, well-educated elites are still marrying. This model could eventually trickle down to the less well educated. Marriage still has many benefits for both adults and children. Moreover, marriage is a legally and socially supported institution in our culture and an integral part of many people’s religious faith.

On the pessimistic side, major demographic trends,



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once they gain a certain momentum, are hard to reverse. The youngest generation is marrying less than older ones, suggesting that the retreat from marriage will continue. Other advanced countries are also seeing a decline in marriage, suggesting the trend has little to do with policies specific to the U.S. And opportunities for women that enable them to support themselves and establish identities separate from those of wife and mother are still increasing. Perhaps most distressing, single parenthood may replicate itself intergenerationally by reducing the life chances of children, especially boys with absent fathers.

What might we do to ensure that more children are born to adults who are ready to be parents and in a stable and committed relationship?

There seem to be two schools of thought about this. Liberals contend that single parents are here to stay and need more assistance. Conservatives want to restore marriage as the primary institution for raising children. I do not disagree with their goal, but we have no real agenda for achieving it. Marriage education programs and efforts to make taxes and benefit programs more marriage-friendly have not moved the needle much, if at all. For example, President George W. Bush launched a Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002 that funded programs to encourage or sustain marriage among low-income families using counseling and relationship education. One carefully evaluated program, Building Strong Families, focused on unwed parents but had no effect on their marriage rates. Perhaps government is not the best source of marriage-promotion efforts. Religious and civic organizations, on the other hand, have a role to play, but they are working against some powerful trends in the other direction.

Both conservatives and liberals support strengthening the education and training system to ensure that young adults will have the kind of opportunities that will motivate them to avoid early parenthood and make marriage more likely. Especially important is making sure that well-paying jobs are available to young men, thereby making them more marriageable. More career and technical education, apprenticeships, and wage subsidies for childless individuals have all been proposed as possible contributors to this goal. Whether they will work or not to slow the growth of single-parent families remains to be seen.

My own view is that much more attention needs to be given to changing drifters

into planners, that is, to encouraging young adults to think more about whether, when, and with whom to have children. Backed up by the availability of newer and much more effective forms of birth control, and reasonable educational and career opportunities for young men and women, this is a realistic goal. It should help to reconnect marriage and parenting by encouraging young adults to wait until they have met Mr. or Ms. Right before having children.

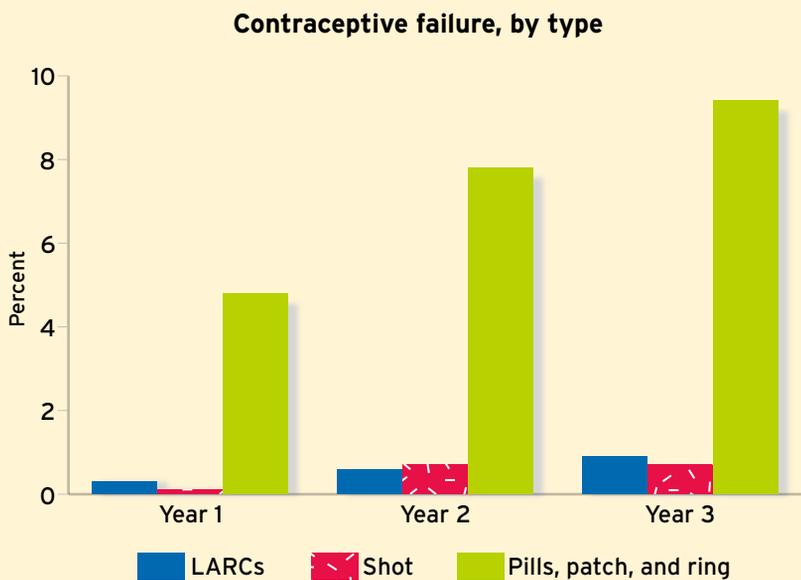
### The Role of Birth Control

It is not just marriage that improves a child's life chances, but family planning as well. Once couples are able to plan together when to have children, it improves a child's education and adult earning ability. In a series of papers, University of Michigan professor Martha Bailey found that the diffusion of effective forms of birth control, such as the pill, after legal and financial restraints on its use were lifted in the 1960s and 1970s, enabled

### Assessing Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives

(Figure 1)

*In the Contraceptive CHOICE Project in St. Louis, women using long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) had significantly lower rates of unintended pregnancy than those using a pill, patch, or ring.*



NOTES: The Contraceptive CHOICE Project in St. Louis was conducted from August 2007 through September 2011. The sample analysis includes 7,486 participants who used either LARCs (5,781), the depot medroxyprogesterone acetate shot (176), or the pill, a patch, or a ring (1,527).

SOURCE: Brooke Winner et al., "Effectiveness of Long-Acting Reversible Contraception," *New England Journal of Medicine* (2012)

young men and women to adjust the number and timing of their children to better reflect their preferences. This, in turn, enabled their children to obtain more education and higher incomes. Bailey suggests several mechanisms for these impacts on a child's education and income as an adult. When parents achieve their own goals, their families are smaller, which enables them to extend their own educational and labor-market experiences, and to invest more time or resources in each child. In addition, there is a smaller youth cohort. This smaller cohort limits competition for public resources, including teacher time (e.g., class size) and college slots. Finally, young adults are able to delay marriage, much as the well-educated are doing today, leading to better and more stable matches. Bailey finds that the increased availability and lower costs of family planning in the 1960s and 1970s produced a 2- to 3-percent increase in family

most effective and easy ways of preventing it. But I believe a lot of the discussion about the value of children in low-income communities is based on small samples of highly disadvantaged individuals and should not be extrapolated to the half of all births that are now occurring outside of marriage among the youngest generation. The hard data, as opposed to the more qualitative evidence, show that the majority of unwed births are unintended. And unintended pregnancy and birth rates are especially high among low-income and minority women. If we could lower their unintended pregnancy rates to the level experienced by college-educated women, we could reduce the proportion of children born outside of marriage by 25 percent.

Of course, we should work on expanding educational and job opportunities at the same time to increase the motivation to avoid early pregnancy, but I know of no other approach



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income for all of the children in an affected cohort, and perhaps a 20- to 30-percent gain for those children who benefited most directly from their parents' greater access to birth control. She notes that "an important component of these income gains reflects increases in children's educational attainment."

The chief actor in this historical drama was the invention and diffusion of the pill. Now, a second family-planning revolution is in the offing, led by long-acting reversible contraceptives (or LARCs), such as IUDs. Where they have been made affordable, and women have been educated about their safety and effectiveness, usage has climbed dramatically and unintended pregnancy rates have fallen sharply. They enable women to pursue more education, to get more experience on the job, and to marry unencumbered by a child from a prior relationship. High schools and community colleges could be doing more to educate young people about their contraceptive options, but their efforts need to be supplemented with good online resources. These and popular media are proving to be effective ways of getting out new messages and information. The TV reality show *16 and Pregnant* was responsible for one-third of the reduction in the teen birth rate in 2009–10, according to a study by economists Phillip Levine, at Wellesley College, and Melissa Kearney, at the University of Maryland.

Is birth control a magic bullet? No. There will always be some people who want a baby, even though they are not prepared to raise her, and there will always be others, who despite not being ready for parenthood, do not choose to avail themselves of the

that could have as large an effect on unwed childbearing as better birth control and at the same time save money for the government. Specifically, we need to educate women about their contraceptive choices (many don't know about IUDs, and those who do are often misinformed about their safety and effectiveness), make them available at no cost to the recipient, and train the medical community on the best clinical practices. Where these three ingredients have been present, the results have been impressive. Unintended pregnancies, including among the disadvantaged, have dropped, and so have Medicaid and other government expenditures. A study of the Colorado Family Planning Initiative by Sue Ricketts and her colleagues found that expanding access to LARCs decreased births to unmarried disadvantaged young women by 27 percent between 2009 and 2011. The CHOICE project in St. Louis found that women who used LARCs or contraceptive shots had far lower rates of unintended pregnancy than users of other popular methods (see Figure 1).

My hope is that 30 years from now this new family-planning revolution will have the same degree of impact on parenting behavior, income, and children's educational achievement as the advent of the pill. My only regret is that neither Senator Moynihan nor I will be here to see whether my optimism is warranted.

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