

Why family structure is so important

Jonah Goldberg

Jonah Goldberg: The family wars will never end, because family matters — a lot.

It's been a good month for champions of the traditional family, but don't expect the family wars to be ending any time soon.

In recent weeks, a barrage of new evidence has come to light demonstrating what was once common sense. "Family structure matters" in the words of my American Enterprise Institute colleague Brad Wilcox, who is also the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

Princeton University and the left-of-center [Brookings Institution](#) released a study that reported "most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes." Why this is so is still hotly contested.

Another study, co-authored by Mr. Wilcox, found that states with more married parents do better on a broad range of economic indicators, including upward mobility for poor children and lower rates of child poverty. On most economic indicators, the Washington Post summarized, "the share of parents who are married in a state is a better predictor of that state's economic health than the racial composition and educational attainment of the state's residents."

Boys in particular do much better when raised in a more traditional family environment, according to a new report from MIT. This is further corroboration of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous 1965 warning: "From the wild Irish slums of the 19th century Eastern seaboard, to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows a large number of men to grow 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 — that community asks for and gets chaos."

Perhaps most intriguing — and dismaying — a new study by Nicholas Zill of the Institute of Family Studies found that adopted children have a harder time at school than kids raised by their biological parents. What makes this so dismaying is that adoptive parents tend to be better off financially and are just as willing as traditional parents, if not more so, to put in the time and effort of raising kids.

Mr. Zill's finding highlights the problem with traditional family triumphalism. Adoption is a wonderful thing, and just because there are challenges that come with adoption, no one would ever argue that the problems adopted kids face make the alternatives to adoption better. Kids left in orphanages or trapped in abusive homes do even worse.

In other words, every sweeping statement that the traditional family is best must come with a slew of caveats, chief among them: "Compared to what?" A little girl in a Chinese or Russian orphanage is undoubtedly better off with two loving gay or lesbian parents in America. A kid raised by two biological parents who are in a nasty and loveless marriage will likely benefit from her parents getting divorced.

"In general," writes St. Lawrence University professor Steven Horwitz, "comparisons of different types of family structures must avoid the 'Nirvana Fallacy' by not comparing an idealized vision of married parenthood with a more realistic perspective on single parenthood. The choices facing couples in the real world are always about comparing imperfect alternatives."

Of course, that point can be made about almost every human endeavor, because we live in a flawed world. And just because we don't — and can't — live in perfect consistency with our ideals, that is not an argument against the ideals themselves.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that family structure is so controversial. The family, far more than government or schools, is the institution we draw the most meaning from. From the day we are born, it gives us our identity, our language and our expectations about how the world should work. Before we become individuals or citizens or voters, we are first and foremost part of a family. That is why social engineers throughout the ages see family as a competitor to, or problem for, the state.

And the family wars will never end, because family matters — a lot.

Jonah Goldberg is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a senior editor of National Review. His email is goldbergcolumn@gmail.com. Twitter: @JonahNRO.

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