



Parental Care and its Counterfeits

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...In examining the characteristics of parental care, we can begin with a particularly appropriate image used by Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving*. Fromm maintains that a good parent always gives “the gift of milk and honey” to his or her child. “Milk” here refers to the parent’s role in providing for the child’s basic needs, life and growth, while “honey” refers to their role in instilling in the child a love for living and a happiness at being alive. On the most basic level, then, parental care involves a commitment to care for the child’s physical and emotional well-being. Fromm goes on to say that while most parents are capable of giving milk, not all are capable of giving honey too. In order to give honey, he maintains, one must not only be a good parent, but a happy and secure human being as well.¹

This second dimension of parental care (instilling in a child a love for life) leads to the third—the willingness to promote the personal autonomy of one’s child. Eventually every well adjusted child will want to separate from his mother, to attach himself to friends of his own choosing and later to establish an intimate relationship with another adult—to carve out his own unique domain in life, so to speak. Such separation is essential if the child is to eventually become a completely separate entity from his mother.² A healthy mother, claims Fromm, will actually help to facilitate this process:

The mother must not only tolerate, she must wish for and support the child’s separation. It is only at this stage that motherly love becomes such a difficult task, that it requires unselfishness, the ability to give everything and want nothing but the happiness of the loved one. It is also at this stage that many mothers fail in their task of motherly love. The narcissistic, the domineering, the possessive woman can succeed in being a “loving” mother as long as the child is small. Only the really loving woman, the woman who is happier in giving than in taking, who is firmly rooted in her own existence, can be a loving mother when the child is in the process of separation.³

While a clingy, possessive mother ultimately works to undermine her child’s ability to develop into an autonomous individual, the healthy mother recognizes that her work is not complete until her child no longer is dependent upon her. On a superficial level the healthy mother may seem less caring than her unhealthy counterpart, because she is determined at all cost to help her child stand on his own. As her child grows older, she allows him greater

amounts of freedom and responsibility, and eventually might even seem to push him out of her household. In the end, however, the child who has learned from his mother to take responsibility for his own life will stand a much better chance of being able to mature into an autonomous adult in his own right.

Finally, there are two other responsibilities of parenthood, which though often neglected, are actually of paramount importance: a good parent is also obligated to work to the best of his or her ability to raise children who are morally good individuals as well as good citizens. Although the importance of instilling a sense of virtue and citizenship in children has been lost in our own times, these two facets of parenting were considered crucial in previous centuries. Plato, for example, spends a considerable amount of the *Republic* discussing the proper training necessary to ensure that the children of guardian parents will develop harmonious souls and will care for the good of the *polis* even more than their own good. Likewise, in his *Emile*, the philosopher Rousseau warns that the failure of fathers in particular to care for the moral and civic characters of their children is inexcusable:

A father has only done a third of his duty when he begets children and makes provision for them. To his species he owes men; to society he owes social beings; to the state he owes citizens. Every person who fails to pay this triple debt is blameworthy, even more so if he only pays part of it. The man who cannot fulfillment a father's duties has no right to become a father.⁴

It is not enough to raise children who are healthy, happy and autonomous if these children will ultimately grow up to be self-absorbed louts, who care little for the needs of other human beings or for the well-being of their communities.

As you probably have noticed, it is my conviction that being a good parent is actually quite an arduous undertaking.⁵ While our own society seems inordinately concerned about providing for the material needs of children, questions of their needs as moral, civic and spiritual beings goes largely unaddressed. This overemphasis on the material needs of children has led to a far too facile ideal of parenthood, in which anyone who can provide the requisite amount of “stuff” for their children become a good parent *ipso facto*. And yet by broadening the scope of parental care, I have also increased the likelihood that many parents will fail in their responsibility to provide adequate care for their children.

Failure is perhaps inevitable in a job as complex as parenting. However, I would like to argue that three current trends in contemporary family life make such failure all but inevitable—the rise of the single parent household, the increase in the number of two-income families, and the all too common use of day care in our society.

The Single Parent Household

At the present time approximately 44-66% of all marriages end in divorce. The rate of divorce in the United States has in fact risen more than 250% from 1940 to 1989.⁶ While in some cases the increase in divorce rates is a result of women leaving abusive family situations, a far more prevalent cause of divorce seems to be general incompatibility between marital partners, and a lack of desire to work out difficulties.⁷ Christopher Lasch has even argued that the increase in divorce rates in this country is a consequence of a society that places an emphasis on “immediate gratification and planned obsolescence.” It is symp-

tomatic, he maintains, of a culture that is wary of any sort of long term commitments.⁸

In recent years there has also been a dramatic increase in the number of out-of-wedlock births in the United States. In the 1950's and 60's, for example, 5% of children were born into single parent households. By 1990 that number rose to 27%. This figure accounts for 17% of all white children and 57% of black children. At the present time approximately one out of every four women has children outside of marriage. As Barbara Dafoe Whitehead points out, "With the rates of divorce and non-marital birth so high, family disruption is at its peak. Never before have so many children experienced family breakup caused by events other than death. Each year a million children go through divorce or separation and almost as many are born out of wedlock."⁹

The increase in the number of single parent households, whether as a result of divorce or out-of-wedlock births, has had some damaging consequences on the children raised in these households. Most obviously, the breakdown of the two parent household has led to an increase in poor families: single parent households headed by women are 6.5 times more likely to be poor than two parent households.¹⁰ David Popenoe has gone so far as to suggest that the increase in the rate of child poverty in the United States (from 14% in 1969 to 20% today) can be attributed primarily to the effects of divorce on American families.¹¹ The women who head these households are typically also under incredible stress, forced to work long hours to support their family and then having to come home and take on the burden of raising children and caring for the household. While it is difficult enough for two parents working together to raise children properly, the single mother who bears complete responsibility for the welfare of her children has an almost overwhelming burden placed upon her. The situation, of course, is even worse for those women who lack a larger network of family and friends to assist them.

Recent studies also seem to indicate that children growing up in single parent families also have a much higher likelihood of developing emotional and behavioral problems in life. For example, children raised in single parent households are twice as likely to drop out of high school and 2.5 times more likely get pregnant as teenagers.¹² Other studies have shown that these children are also 2-3 times more likely to experience school failure or to suffer from behavioral disorders during childhood. Boys raised in single parent households are more likely to act aggressively and girls more likely to act promiscuously.¹³ These children are also much more prone—perhaps up to 15% more prone—to committing delinquent acts than their counterparts in intact families.¹⁴ In study of adolescent murders in 1987, 75% were children of divorced or never married parents.¹⁵ Additionally, it has been determined that 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from single parent households.¹⁶

There are those who would argue that these statistics actually reflect the impact of poverty on children, rather than the effects of growing up in a single parent household. However, after the subject groups were controlled for income, boys from single parent households were still more likely to commit crimes than those from two parent households.¹⁷ Indeed, a study done in 1988 indicates that the proportion of single parent families in a community is a predictor of violent crime and burglary, but that the poverty level of the community is a negligible factor.¹⁸ The point that these studies raise is that the increase in social pathologies in single parent households cannot be explained just by poverty. There is solid evidence that the very structure of single parent household is to blame for many of the pathologies of children raised in them.

These problems are exacerbated in black communities where there has been a steady increase in the number of single parent households since the 1960's.¹⁹ In 1960, for example, only 8.7% of white children were living without a father, a figure which increased to 18.2% by 1988. By comparison 27.7% of black children were living without a father in 1960 and by 1988 this number rose dramatically to 58.4%.²⁰ Over half of all black children today are being raised in single parent households, in many cases without any stable male presence. One could argue that many of the social pathologies that exist in the black community, especially the significantly higher incidence of violent crime among black males and teen pregnancy among black females, can be partially attributed to the breakdown of the black family in the United States.

This is certainly not to say that the existence of two parent households alone is sufficient to ensure that children grow up well adjusted and morally responsible. Certainly children raised in two parent households where parents are hostile, abusive or selfish will experience many of the same disadvantages as children raised in single parent households.²¹ Nor would I wish to suggest that it is absolutely impossible to raise a child without a father in the household: there are numerous examples of woman who have done adequate and even marvelous jobs raising children on their own. It must be acknowledged, however, that such a situation is difficult at best and that it is probably not in the best interest of the child—as the studies above seem to indicate. As Barbara Whitehead points out, growing up in a two parent household offers clear advantages that a single parent household does not. “Though far from perfect as a social institution, the intact family offers children greater security and better outcomes than its fast-growing alternatives....Not only does the intact family protect the child from poverty and economic insecurity; it also provides greater non-economic investment of parental time, attention and emotional support over the entire life course.”²² While she is not trying to argue that all two parent households are necessarily better than all single parent households, Whitehead disputes the claim that the two are equally beneficial to children.

The Two Income Family

The second factor contributing to the breakdown of family life in the United States is the rise in two income households. In 1960 only 19% of married women with children younger than six were working. By 1998 that figure rose to 54%.²³ Again, while there are those who would argue that such a dramatic increase in the number of working mothers is not necessarily problematic in itself, common sense tells us that replacing half of all mothers with children under three with a smaller number of day care providers must have detrimental consequences on the well-being of these children. As Amatai Etziona, a leader in the Communitarian movement observes, “If this were any other business, say, shoemaking, and more than half the labor force had been lost and replaced with fewer, less qualified hands, and still we asked the shoemakers to produce the same number of shoes of the same quality (with basically no changes in technology), we would be considered crazy.”²⁴ In essence this is precisely what has happened to the American family, and the end result is clearly detrimental to the quality of the “product”—children.

Again, there are various causes for this increase in the number of families where both parents work, the most obvious of which being that two incomes are often necessary for the poor and middle class families to survive economically. I have no doubts that there are

many mothers in the work force who would love to be able to spend more time with their children, but simply cannot afford to do so. This tragic situation speaks to the need for significant changes in public policy and the need to increase wages in order to allow one parent—and this could be a father as well as a mother—the option of remaining at home when children are young.

A more pernicious cause for this increase, however, has to do with the increasing materialism of Western society. In a consumeristic society where success is often equated with the possession of “stuff,” it is often seen as necessary to maximize income by having both parents in the workforce. Certainly, the material needs of the most families today are much greater than the typical family of the 1950’s and 60’s. In general, we live in larger homes, possess more gadgets and appliances, and travel much more frequently. We continue to have the delusion, however, that it is possible to “have it all” — more money for stuff and more time with our families. The sad reality that many parents refuse to face is that, with the exception of a small financial elite, most families cannot “have it all.” Hard choices ultimately have to be made. Parents, Amatai Etziona warns, “must face the possibility that they will have to curtail their gainful employment in order to invest more time and energy into their offspring. This may hurt their chances of making money directly (by working fewer hours) or indirectly (by advancing more slowly in their careers).”²⁵

Although the most common argument why both parents have to work is that it is a necessity—that two incomes are needed just to get by—Etziona argues that in many cases there is indeed a choice, whether or not people are aware of it. The objective needs of families, Etziona reminds us, are not many. They basically boil down to three: food, clothing and shelter. The problem he says is that many people confuse what they want (large homes, new cars, tv’s, vcr’s) with what they actually need. By reducing unnecessary wants, it may be quite possible to live fairly well on one income. The result of opting to do with less is that it may very well become possible for parents to spend more time with their children, personally guiding their development.

There are those, however, who would object to Etziona’s argument that families are forced to make the kind of hard choices described above. They would argue that the improvement in the quality of day care means that parents can indeed “have it all.” They can advance in their careers, have more financial resources for material goods, and at the same time ensure that their children are well provided for. Some studies even seem to indicate that children raised in day care are as well off as those raised by their biological parents. Interestingly, one of the great philosophical texts of the Enlightenment—Rousseau’s *Emile*—provides an effective philosophical response to those who seek to promote day care as a viable alternative to parental care.

The Perils of Day Care

Although Rousseau does not speak specifically about day care in his *Emile*, he does speak in general terms about the problem of having people other than parents act as the primary care-giver for children—a custom that was common among the affluent in his own time. Real care for a child, Rousseau asserts, demands an emotional attachment between the care-giver and child. Parents have this attachment naturally by virtue of the events surrounding birth. Others who look after the child in the parents’ absence may never be able to develop this kind of emotional bond. “People sometimes find amusement in other

people's children," he warns, "but it is only their own that they love."²⁶ Even the best day care providers "lack the appeal of natural affection" that is innate in all but the most heartless parents. There are limits to how attentive they can be, especially if they have to attend to more than one child.

What many parents who opt for day care fail to realize is that caring for children is a job for the day care provider—plain and simple. Their main reward and their primary motivation is financial remuneration, not necessarily the joy of helping a child to develop properly.²⁷ As Rousseau correctly point out, "services paid for are only apparent and it is real services we seek."²⁸ The "apparent services that Rousseau speaks about involve a mere "tending to." In tending to the needs of children, the day care provider is able to provide for only the most basic needs, and these necessarily are the most obvious physical ones (feeding them, changing their diapers, and making sure that they are somewhat comfortable and safe). Real care, however, is concern for the whole child (physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, etc.), and this kind of all-encompassing involvement typically cannot be performed by the day care provider.

Rousseau does maintain, however, that real affection for the child might develop if the care-giver has real love or affection for the parent of the child. He thus argues that if a parent is not able to care for a child himself the next best option is to have the child cared for by a close relative or good friend of the parent. Ideally, in this case, the love and affection that these intimates have for the child's parent may inspire them to show greater concern for the well-being of the child in their care.

A second problem with day care according to Rousseau is that separation of mother from child can lead to a diminishment of natural affection in a mother. The child who spends most of his day cared for by others becomes an alien presence that a mother is forced to cope with for a few hours a day and on weekends. Tired from working all day, the child vies for her attention at the same time she is trying to take care of the business of her household and also trying to find time to relax herself.

Conversely, Rousseau maintains that the failure of the mother to personally provide for the child's needs leads to diminishment of the child's affection for the mother. The duties of mother and child, writes Rousseau, are reciprocal: "failure on one side leads to a neglect of duty on the other. The child's love for his mother should precede any sense of obligation. If the call of blood is not strengthened by habit and nurture, it fades out in the early years and the heart (one might say) dies still-born."²⁹ It is for this reason that many children seem more attached to their nannies or day-care providers than to their own parents.

Current studies seem to bear out Rousseau's concerns about the adverse effects of professionalized care on the development of the child and his relationship to his parents. In 1978 child psychologists Jay Belsky and Lawrence Steinberg examined the various studies on day care that had previously been done and concluded that on the basis of the evidence presented there were no negative intellectual or emotional effects of day care on children's development.³⁰ A decade later, however, Belsky revised his previous position, arguing that the bond between mother and child weakens when children under 12 months old are placed in day care and that the bond between the father and child also weakens due to the increased likelihood of the mother monopolizing their children's attention during evenings and weekends. Such ineffectual bonding with parents leads to children who are more physically and verbally aggressive with adults, who are less likely to obey maternal directions and less tolerant of frustration. Belsky also determined that the quality of the

day care program in which the child is enrolled doesn't seem to affect the negative results reported. The damage done to the child is as severe whether the child is being cared for in an expensive university run program or by the teen baby sitter down the block.³¹

Conclusions

It would seem, then, that the ideal for family environment would seem to be a stable two parent household, where there is at least one parent at home with children during their early, formative years. I know that there are those who might consider what I am proposing to be a call to return to the kind of "Father Knows Best" sort of family that probably never really existed in the first place—the kind where mother stayed at home all day, made tasty dinners for the family every night and cleaned the house while decked out in pearls.

If it is true that a stable two parent family in which one parent at least is home while his or her child is young is the ideal environment for raising future citizens, then the Ultimately question may, in fact, become, "How do we provide the kind of economic and social environment that would make such a family environment possible?" And the answer to this question might very well mean supporting the kinds of programs generally advocated by liberals—most notably, tax credits for poor families and affordable public-funded day care. This position, therefore, is not necessarily a conservative one, and might even provide an opportunity for liberals and conservatives to work together to find ways to strengthen the American family....

NOTES

1. Eric Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956) 42.
2. This movement away from the mother, Fromm maintains, points out the fundamental difference between erotic love and maternal love: in erotic love two separate individuals become one, while in maternal love two individuals who were one become separate (Fromm, 43).
3. Fromm, 43-44.
4. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*. Trans. and Ed. William Boyd (New York: Bureau of Publications, 1963) 18.
5. This brings us to an important and often debated question: is there a right to be a parent? Does every individual, regardless of his or her abilities, temperaments or circumstance have a right to produce children and to raise them as he or she sees fit? The question has been raised in a provocative article written by Bonnie Steinbock and Ron McClamrock, entitled, "When Birth is Unfair to the Child" (Hastings Center Report 24 (1994): 15-21). Their answer is that being a parent is more a matter of duties and obligations than of rights, and, if one cannot fulfill one's duties, one has no business becoming a parent. The authors begin their argument by positing what they refer to as the principle of parental responsibility."According to this principle individuals should refrain from having children if they cannot give them the chance at a happy life. If a child's life, for example, will be filled with pain and severe limitation, one should avoid having that child. Two of the paradigm cases that they refer to—a parent who has a high risk for transmitting a debilitating disease, such as Huntington's disease, to his or her child or the teenager who is unable to provide for the basic needs of her child—certainly lend support to their position. In such cases where there is little doubt of the suffering that a child will experience, the authors argue that the moral choice is to opt not to have children at all. One could argue, however, that because the authors focus primarily on the physical and material well-being of child, the application of their principle does not go far enough. I would argue, for instance, that emotionally immature or extremely selfish individuals or individuals who

manifest violent or abusive tendencies should also refrain from having children. One could also make a case that extremely ambitious people should avoid having children, since their desire for career advancement will probably prevent them from carrying out their parental responsibilities.

6. Bryce J. Christensen, *Utopia Against the Family: The Problems and Politics of the American Family* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 19.

7. Census Bureau statistics seem to bear this out, indicating that the chance for divorce is highest during the third year of marriage with an 8% likelihood for divorce at this point. After the third year of marriage, the likelihood of divorce drops off steadily for each year a couple stays together. These facts seem to support the conclusion that many couples, rather than attempting to work out the inevitable difficulties that are part of any serious relationship, simply opt for the easiest way out. Those couples who make the commitment to work out the difficulties during the early years of marriage, on the other hand, have a very high likelihood of staying together permanently. See also: Lynn Gigy and Joan B. Kelly, "Reasons for Divorce: Perspectives of Divorcing Men and Women," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 18 (1992): 169-187.

8. Christopher Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995) 95-96.

9. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1994): 50.

10. Nicholas Davidson, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe," *Policy Review* 51 (Winter 1990): 40; Whitehead, 49.

11. David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 54.

12. Sara McLanahan, "The Consequences of Single Motherhood." *The American Prospect* 18 (1994): 49.

13. Wade F. Horn, "Character and Family." *The Content of America's Character: Recovering Civic Virtue*. Ed. Don E. Eberly (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1995) 84-85. See also: Deborah A. 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; Sara S. McLanahan and L. Bumpass, "Intergenerational Consequences of Family Disruption." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 130-152.

14. Two studies seem to bear out this claim: L. Edward Wells and Joseph H. Rankin, "Families and Delinquency: A Metaanalysis of the Impact of Broken Homes." *Social Problems* 38 (1991): 71-93; David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock, "The Impact of Divorce on Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50 (1988): 619-648.

15. Davidson, 42.

16. Whitehead, 47, 77.

17. Whitehead, 77.

18. Davidson, 42. See also Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. *Growing Up With a Single Parent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) 79-94.

19. The negative impact of the breakdown of the black family was raised as early as 1965 with the Moynihan Report. At that time Moynihan argued that the continual erosion of black family life in the United States threatened to undermine the progress that black Americans had made during the Civil Rights Movement. Daniel P. Moynihan. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington D.C.: Office of Planning and Research/Department of Labor, 1965).

20. Davidson, 40.

21. Although even this view has been challenged recently. In a recent work entitled *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, Judith Wallerstein argues that, with the exception of certain extreme situations, children are actually better off with unhappily married parents who make the commitment to remain together than they are in divorced households. See also: Walter Kinn, "Should You Stay Together for the Kids?" *Time* (September 25, 2000) ???

22. Whitehead, 80.

23. David Popenoe, "Family Decline in America," *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood: An Introduction to Family Ethics*. Ed. Laurence D. Houlgate (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999) 113. See also: Christensen, 19.
24. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 56.
25. Etzioni, 64-65.
26. Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Memoir on the Education of the Prince of Wirtemberg's Infant Daughter, Sophia (1763)." *Rousseau: Minor Educational Works*. Ed. William Boyd (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1956) 79.
27. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*. Ed. William Boyd (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1956) 16.
28. Rousseau, "Memoir", 80.
29. Rousseau, *Emile*, 17.
30. Jay Belsky and Lawrence D. Steinberg, "The Effects of Day Care: A Critical Review," *Child Development* 49 (1978): 929-49.
31. Jay Belsky, "Infant Day Care and Socioemotional Development," *Journal of Child Psychology* 29 (1988): 398. See also: Ron Haskins, "Public School Aggression Among Children with Varying Day Care Experience," *Child Development* 56 (1985).

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