

The Impact of Family Breakdown on Children and Society

Mr Justice Coleridge, a former family judge in the U.K. with more than 37 years of experience with family law compared the breakdown of family life with being as destructive as the effects of global warming. He described it as a problem that affects all levels of society and that on a daily basis judges like him witness a *“never-ending carnival”* of human misery, and that *“almost all of society’s social ills can be traced back to the collapse in family stability.”* Mr Coleridge isn’t the only one describing the destructive effects of family breakdown. In a report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), it warned that the UK is experiencing a “tsunami” of family breakdown and the devastating effects this is having on children and society. The breakdown of family life isn’t a problem that is isolated to the UK but actually a worldwide problem, varying only in its intensity in various countries. The problem seems to be growing most rapidly in countries where Western liberal values take precedence. To quote the words of Australia’s senior and experienced politician, Kevin Andrews, *“The greatest threat facing the western world was not global warming, the financial crisis or the threat of radical Islam, but “the steady, but continuing breakdown of the essential structures of civil society – marriage, family and community”.*

Many factors can be named as reasons why we see families breaking up. Infidelity, financial problems, violence, alcohol and drug abuse are just a few reasons why we see families breaking down. All these troubles will automatically have a negative influence on everyone within the family-unit, but children are the most vulnerable victims of the negative effects consistent with family breakdown. This is especially so because of their dependency on adults to help them grow in to adulthood. Family life in most cases should create a building block for children to progress and develop throughout life. But when the family unit breaks apart, children are left with little stability causing them to miss out on the invaluable aspects of childhood that are important for life.

Relationship with Parents:

The most significant consequence for children after their family breaks apart is their diminishing relationship with one or both parents.

For example, when parents split up, children will often grow up in ‘one-parent’ households, in many cases reducing or losing contact with one of their parents. In the U.K. and U.S one third of children are being raised without their biological fathers (US Census and UK Office for National Statistics). In the UK around a million children are growing up without a father in their lives (CSJ). This statistic becomes even more worrying when a recent study conducted by Harry Benson, Communication Director at the UK organisation the Marriage Foundation, reveals that *“not having a father in the house remains the number one predictor of teenage mental health problems in the UK.”* It is clear that children growing up without fathers are, on the whole, more vulnerable.

If it isn’t enough that for many children the contact with one parent will be minimized or even completely severed after a breakdown, there is also evidence that the relationship with the parent whom children grow up with, often deteriorates due to a range of factors. (Pryor, J. and Rodgers, B. (2001) Children in Changing Families. Oxford: Blackwell) One factor is the necessity of the lone-parent, often the mother, becoming the sole breadwinner for the family such that they are forced to place their children in the hands of others to look after and often raise due to their work commitments. With the family unit becoming smaller over the years (having limited extended family) children are often left in the care of non-significant others or left to fend for themselves as ‘latch-key kids’ who come home from school to an empty house where they have to look after themselves, including preparing their own meals. Furthermore, depression for both fathers and mothers is significantly correlated to divorce, putting even more pressure on the child-parent relationships.

Negative Economic Impact:

After family breakup, the economic situation of children often changes radically.

A survey conducted in the US reveals that the custodial mother experiences a loss of 25-50% of their pre-divorce income. Only 50% of these mothers had some kind of child support agreement, and 25% of the mothers who had actually been granted support, received no payments. (US Census Bureau. 2011. Divorce Rates Highest in the South, Lowest in the Northeast, Census Bureau Reports United States Census Bureau Web Site.) In the UK single-parent families are the most likely household type to be living in financial poverty. Lone parents are 2.5 times more likely to be living below 60 percent of median income. 41 per cent of children from lone-parent families were in households living on less than 60 per cent of median income after housing costs. (CSJ, Fractured Families) To quote a teacher from the U.K. what this actually means on the ground: *"We see children who aren't eating before lunchtime. Many can't afford uniform or shoes. And lots are caring for younger siblings single handed."* Children living in poverty are almost twice as likely to live in bad housing. This has significant effects on both their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as educational achievement.

The Effects on Children's Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Competency and Mental Health:

As a society we surely need to understand that of the many different relationships people form over the course of their life span, the relationship between parent and child is among the most important. The way parents behave towards each other and how they behave towards their children, will be a major indicator on how the young develop into adulthood and what role they will be able to play in society. With the relationship between parent and child deteriorating due to the declining state of the family-unit, we see that children from broken families are losing a general sense of belonging. A sense of belonging means that you feel accepted and valued as a member or part of something. It is an important concept which we need to feel in order to deal with the issues of life around us and to cope with life's difficulties.

Experts have proposed that this important concept is lacking in many youngsters from broken homes and that it seems to be a major factor behind young adults joining gangs. It could also be the reason why we see an increase in gang related crimes. Many youngsters see gang membership as a surrogate family which give them this essential sense of belonging. In an interview with gang members from the US, conducted by Joe Killian, a writer for the News and Record, several members said that, *"Being part of a gang meant you were never alone in the world, which is similar to how many people describe being part of a close-knit family or group of friends."*

In addition, the following conclusion was published in a report by the UK National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers underlining the role of family breakdown in a growing gang culture in the U.K. It stated that family breakdown and a lack of father figures could be to blame for pupils joining gangs, *"Children as young as nine are being drawn into organised crime for protection and to gain a "sense of belonging" because of the lack of positive role models at home."*

The general well-being of children is also being affected by their families breaking up. It was found that the wellbeing of children from broken homes is significantly lower when compared to that of children from two parent families. A large meta-analysis (Amato 1991 and 2001: *Children of divorce in the 1990s: an update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. Journal of Family Psychology, 15, 355-70*) found that children from divorced families had significantly lower scores on a range of outcomes including educational achievement, behaviour, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social competence and long-term health. In a different research, evidence was found that children from separated parents were prone to experiencing more behavioural problems and that they would perform less well at school and leave school with fewer educational qualifications (Pryor, J. and Rodgers, B. (2001) *Children in Changing Families. Oxford: Blackwell*). Other findings were that children of

divorced parents may have lower scores on self-concept and social relations (*Amato 2001*) and that anxiety and depression seem to worsen after the divorce incident (*Strohschein 2005 Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. Journal of Marriage and Family 67: 1286.*)

The burden of family breakdown on the overall emotional development of children was also made clear in a study conducted in Sweden where almost one million children demonstrated that children growing up with single parents were more than twice as likely to experience a serious psychiatric disorder, commit or attempt suicide, or develop an alcohol addiction. Shocking statistics from the US on the effects of fatherless homes and the development of children have revealed just how immense the problem really is. For example in the US, 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes (US Department of Health) and children of single-parent homes are more than twice as likely to commit suicide (Irwin Sandler, PhD, professor of psychology and director of the Prevention Research Center, Arizona State University, Tempe). In addition, a study of 1,977 children age 3 and older living with a residential father or father figure found that children living with married biological parents had significantly fewer externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems than children living with at least one non-biological parent. (Hofferth, S. L. (2006). Residential father family type and child well-being: investment versus selection. *Demography*, 43, 53-78.). There is also significantly more drug use among children who do not live with their mother and father. (Hoffmann, John P. "The Community Context of Family Structure and Adolescent Drug Use." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (May 2002): 314-330.)

Furthermore, an analysis of almost 11,000 families conducted in the UK found that family breakdown poses the single biggest risk to children's mental health once they reach their teens and that having parents who split up was the strongest single influence on girls' mental health, particularly on emotional problems. It was the joint strongest factor in boys' mental health, with strong links to behavioural problems. (The Times)

It has been said that a rise in mental illness could be seen as a reflection of unhappiness in a society. With a rise in rates of depression and anxiety amongst teenagers, the number of children and young adults turning up in A&E with a psychiatric condition doubling in the last 10 years and the amount of hospital admissions for teenagers with eating disorders doubling, (The Independent) governments can no longer deny the epidemic numbers of young people affected emotionally and psychologically by family breakdown and what this highlights about the values and way of life of the society that these governments govern over.

In all western societies, the extended family has all but disappeared, and the traditional two-parent family has become much less widespread as divorce rates, re-marriages, cohabitation, single parenthood and same-sex partnerships have all increased. The repercussions of these changes on society at large, especially on the lives of children have been remarkable. Yet governments seem to be clueless in offering solutions. This is not surprising as it is the very secular liberal values and system that they champion and implement upon their states that has caused this social chaos. Sadly therefore, it is expected that the destructive fall-out of family breakdown will only continue and even accelerate in the coming years, sowing deep misery for so many, particularly the young.

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