

Strengthening family and marriage stability

Shirley Sampson

Reflection on 20 years research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies reveals a body of data from the examination of research questions which is extremely well authenticated, and which provides an illuminating adjunct to understanding our society. We no longer need to delve into the findings of studies from the United Kingdom or the United States to see what is happening to homes and families in similar western societies: we have our very own photograph.

A view of what might be possible in the next two decades is now being debated. In this brief paper, I suggest two possible directions for consideration.

Preparing for parenthood

First, as outlined in the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Research Plan 1999–2001*, since its brief clearly directs it to promote arrangements that facilitate good child rearing, the Institute should give serious consideration through its research and publications to the issue of preparing the younger generations for the role of parenthood.

The present state of affairs – with fewer siblings in smaller families, with migration and mobility which often remove the storehouse of the wisdom and support of relatives, with extended years of schooling, and with the proliferation of immensely time consuming television which is either totally uninformative or mis-informative on the subject of child rearing – means that teenagers know less about young children than possibly any past generation.

More recently, as a consequence of economic rationalisation, the reduction of health services such as hospital care and infant welfare which have formerly provided back-up for new and isolated or uninformed parents has left a serious social vacuum which is manifestly not improving the welfare of babies and young children.

It is not the role of the Institute itself to teach young people about the needs of their future offspring. However, Institute research can illustrate the vacuum which I have suggested exists. In its role of protection and support for the family, the Institute could well influence public debate and action in that direction since research will clearly demonstrate the need. If it is not the role of the Institute, then to whom should we look to ensure that future



generations of parents are aware of the needs of babies and young children, and important issues relating to their health and social development?

In my opinion, the case for preparing each generation for the exacting role of parenthood is irrefutable; clearly, observation and apprenticeship experiences are not now (if they ever were) part of the normal experience of growing up for every child. Western societies such as Sweden and Norway and others approach this social need in a variety of ways, some of which seem to provide a reasonably 'fail- safe' introduction to parenting, as far as that is possible. I believe that the Australian Institute of Family Studies should further this debate.

Enhancing communication and relationship skills

Second, I believe that 20 years of 'no fault' divorce, as we in Australia have known it, amply demonstrates that training in communication and relationship skills is now as much an imperative as is a basic understanding of health.

I am not putting this forward as a way of enabling ambitious young men and women to get on in the world – businesses promote these skills today. I am arguing that the history of marriage has been one of ownership (by males, of the person and property of the woman) and of immutable obligation (by women, that males owe them support) and that these ideas are firmly embedded, even now, in the perceptions of some of the protagonists within our no fault divorce system. How else can we account for the amount of violence and disaffection associated with marriage dissolution and the sharing of children and property which we now witness.

Men and women are not born automatically with communication and relationship skills. In our society, in which self-interest is approved, we learn to resent the political opinions of others; we compare our achievements with others; we dissemble in order to maintain our relative statuses. In other words, by adulthood, our life histories have equipped us *not* to give equal rights to the feelings and opinions of marriage partners, *not* to share what we value unless we exact adequate pay-back, to keep our deepest feelings and fears to ourselves, regardless of whether this will mean misinterpretation by our nearest and dearest.

Young children can be taught to see themselves as others see them, to value consensus over conflict, and openness and discussion rather than fisticuffs, and to recognise and value honesty in relationships with friends and family. When they are helped to perceive the advantages of these strategies for themselves in winning friends and influencing people, children and young adults are more likely to practice them as learned behaviour. Since we know that a great many of the disaffections and arguments between young people and their parents are the consequence of poor communication and inability or unwillingness to accept the point of view of the other, it seems to be only commonsense to allow the young, at least, to be made aware of how relationships work.

There are few mechanisms by which we can develop such skills in great numbers of adults but, to my mind, we are not improving the prospects of future marriage relationships if we do not at least allow young people to see other ways of relating than those that many of them will witness and perhaps deplore in their families of origin. Teaching an understanding of human relationships could never be wasted. ➤

I am arguing, therefore, that part of the search by the Institute for better strategies for living together in family and marriage, and the practices of dissolution of marriage, as laid down in its remit, must include ways of promoting improved communication skills and understandings – through its research and publications, and through stated positions on associated issues.

Conclusion

I have argued for the expansion of the role of the Australian Institute of Family Studies into focused research and the dissemination of findings (as it has done in other areas) to inform public opinion and influence decision makers in government and teacher education institutions to expand their role of preparation of the young for the life roles they will shortly assume.

Ensuring that teenagers, both male and female, are aware of the physical and psychological needs of babies and children is recognition of their value to our future. The expansion of personal understandings of the way we humans relate to each other in public and private roles must diminish the aggression and possessiveness which is now epitomised in the violence and unhappiness of the divorce court.

Long-term goals though they may be, these two objectives are not impossible, especially when we recognise the fundamental assumptions which have been abandoned to make some of the social changes we have already adopted.

Shirley Sampson has had a long involvement with family education. Most recently, from the early 1980s until 1998, Dr Sampson taught post graduate courses in family change in Australia in the Faculty of Education, Monash University.