



The Second Annual Kristin Anderson Moore Lecture

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**Commentary by Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D.
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Thank you, Ron.

I really appreciate your taking time to address this complex issue that intersects with research, policy, programs, and the well-being of children as well as adults.

For Ron, his lens is that of fathers, and that leads to an interest in marriage and children.

For me, my lens is that of children, and that leads to an interest in marriage and fathers.

I wanted to focus on the topic of marriage this year because researchers find that many roads lead to relationships, and good relationships in turn lead to other good outcomes. And, of course, marriage is one of life's central relationships.

When I selected the topic for this Lecture, I didn't realize that the Nation and World would be in an economic tailspin. But that is the reality, and I think that that reality has actually made it even more important to talk about healthy marriage and healthy relationships

Income matters a lot at the bottom of the distribution (and at any income level, when income is falling rapidly); but ever-greater wealth does not necessarily lead to ever-greater happiness.

I would identify four primary reasons why I think it is important to address marriage at this point in time.

1. Because family structure is related to children's development and well-being. Specifically, children who grow up with both biological or adoptive parents face fewer difficulties and challenges and have better outcomes, on average, than children in other family structures. And children raised by married parents have more consistent access to their fathers.

Across dozens of studies, findings consistently indicate advantages for children raised by two biological or adoptive parents across a broad array of child outcomes (including behavior, academic outcomes, and psychological well-being).

The magnitude of the associations between family structure and child outcomes is “modest”; that is, not huge, but not tiny either. On average, risks of poor outcomes are about double. For example, if 10 percent of children with two biological parents have a behavior problem, twice as many (20%) in other family types would have a behavior problem.

However, that still leaves 80 percent who don’t have a behavior problem. In other words, most children who grow up without the benefit of two biological parents nevertheless do just fine. However, on average, they face elevated risks and have somewhat poorer outcomes.

These findings are pretty consistent across subgroups of children; for example, family structure matters for boys and for girls, and across race/ethnicity subgroups. While there are some exceptions for African American children, the findings are remarkably consistent across studies, across groups, and across a broad range of child outcomes. Prof. Paul Amato argues that, because of this breadth and the numbers involved, there would be great social benefit if more children grow up with both parents.

Accordingly, this is the first reason, for me, for focusing on family structure and marriage: the evidence that this matters for children’s development and well-being.

A second reason is related:

2. Because relationship quality is really important to the well-being and life satisfaction of both children and adults.

I noted a minute ago that family structure matters for children; but it turns out that marital quality and conflict also matter. Many studies have focused solely on structure; however, the studies that look beyond structure to examine issues of relationship quality and conflict find that these are as, or sometimes more, important than family structure.

A very extensive body of research indicates that positive relationships are associated with well being. These findings have accumulated across varied types of relationships:

- Parent / child relationships
- Good friendships with peers and good neighbors
- Strong student-to-teacher relationships
- Positive dating and partner relationships, and
- Healthy marriages

Homo sapiens is a social species, and positive relationships appear to make really important contributions to well-being and life satisfaction for both children and adults. At the same time, high and sustained conflict, not to mention violence, are harmful to both children and adults.

However, I want to be very careful here. I'm not saying that income doesn't matter. Especially for poor people, increases in income matter. Moreover, income instability is hard on families. Unemployment is hard economically, and it's hard on relationships. And a large body of research indicates that poverty is harmful to children. In particular, deep and long term poverty is harmful to children.

This is point #3.

3. Tough economic times challenge relationships. Even among middle class families, job loss, loss of a home, and bills that cannot be paid put enormous stress on marital and family relationships.

Tough times are when people need strong relationships the most, and it is valuable to highlight and affirm the importance of relationships during tough times.

This leads to my fourth point.

4. Relationships can often be improved, with effort, and working on relationships can, I believe, improve the quality of life for parents and for children at relatively modest cost. As yet, the findings for marriage relate to middle class families (and we await results from the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Building Strong Families evaluation studies).

Also, it is critical to note (again) that this doesn't mean that other factors like income and employment are unimportant.

But, recognizing this limitation, there is a developing body of related research that indicates that relationships can be improved. In fact, results from experimental evaluations of varied types of interventions that address social relationships indicate positive impacts on a number of child outcomes.

For example:

- The Problem Solving Skills Training Program, a school-based social competence program, was found to improve conflict resolution skills among children;
- The Big Brothers Big Sisters Community mentoring program was found to improve peer relationships, parent-child relationships, school achievement, and conflict resolution, and to reduce substance use; relationship quality and duration appear to be among the critical ingredients;
- PATHS (the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Program) works with teachers so they can help children discuss and manage emotions. At a two-year follow-up, the treatment group was found to have higher adaptive functioning and lower rates of conduct problems; and
- The Supporting Father Involvement program, being implemented by Carolyn and Phil Cowan, compares Couples groups and Fathers-only groups to a control

group. Preliminary analyses, now under review, indicate that both approaches are effective. For example, children's behavior problems were found to decline.

There are of course, interventions that have fallen short (Parents Fair Share, for example), which indicates that it isn't necessarily a slam dunk. And the magnitude of impacts is often modest, so it seems to me that it is really important to keep working on stronger interventions.

In sum, it seems to me that:

- family structure matters; and
- relationship quality also matters; but
- economic and other difficulties pose serious challenges to strong relationships; nevertheless,
- a number of interventions that focus on improving social skills and relationship quality have been found to be effective.

For these reasons, I'm not ready to "leave it"; but I do think that there is a lot more to learn about how to foster healthy marriages and relationships.

Thank you.