

## Parent-Child Relations: Assessing Recent Changes

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### **Abstract:**

Profound structural changes in American marriage and family life over the past three decades have transformed "traditional" living arrangements for children and stimulated an enormous amount of popular and scholarly interest regarding the consequences for children's well-being. Of greatest concern have been the impact of divorce, single-parent families, maternal employment, dual-earner marriages, and a general erosion of parental commitment and support. A systematic review of the research indicates that although parents and children spend very little time together, they remain generally satisfied with their relationships, largely due to a pattern of consistent, but detached, parental support. I argue that the consequences of maternal employment, divorce, and single-parent family structure have been greatly exaggerated, and that researchers need to investigate processes more directly influencing children, notably economic hardship and high levels of marital and family conflict.

### **Article:**

Several dramatic structural changes have occurred in American marriage and family life over the past three decades: in the proportion of births occurring out of wedlock, the proportion of marriages ending in divorce, postponed marriage and childbearing, smaller family size, single-parent families, stepfamilies, and dual-earner marriages. One important question is how these changes have influenced parent-child relations and children's well-being. Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill (1983) assert that "the experience of growing up has probably changed as much in the past several decades as in any comparable period in American history" (p. 667). The popular literature and media frequently blame the family for high rates of teenage sexual activity, pregnancy, delinquency, and alcohol and drug use, often citing low levels of parent-child interaction and high levels of family conflict and "broken homes." Family scholars have empirically documented that rapidly changing values, social roles, behavioral patterns, and household arrangements have negatively influenced parent-child relations.

Neal, Groat, and Wicks (1989) observe that negative and even hostile attitudes toward children are common in the United States today and that young married couples report considerable ambivalence about having and rearing children. Nock and Kingston (1988) report that dual-earner parents spend considerably less time with their children than their single-earner ("traditional") counterparts. Numerous studies find that marital dissolution and reconstitution disrupt primary bonds between parents and children and cause short-term emotional and behavioral problems for children (Hetherington, Camara, & Featherman, 1983; Kinard & Reinherz, 1984, 1986). Two recent reviews (Demo & Acock, 1988; MeLanahan & Booth, 1989) document consistent empirical evidence that single parents (mostly mothers) are less involved in their children's school work, exert less parental influence, and find it more difficult to supervise and discipline their children, family processes that lead adolescents in single-parent families to exhibit significantly higher rates of deviant behavior.

But despite the accumulating evidence, two limitations prevent a fuller understanding of exactly how parent-child relations have changed: (a) research in this area is ahistorical (Gecas & Seff, 1990); and (b) family

research continues to be guided by traditional notions of family normality and deviance. The objective of this paper is to determine how parent-child relations have changed from the traditional American family of the 1950s, and how these changes have influenced the social and psychological well-being of American children. First I examine recent structural changes in children's living arrangements, in the domestic division of labor, and in parental child-rearing values. Then I assess how the frequency and quality of parent-child interaction have been affected by maternal employment, dual-earner families, divorce, and single-parent families. I conclude by assessing the current state of parent-child interaction and the implications for children's wellbeing. It will be argued that, although children's well-being has declined over the past three decades (Uhlenberg & Eggebeen, 1986), the negative consequences attributed to divorce, single-parent family structure, and maternal employment have been greatly exaggerated.

## THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN FAMILY AND RECENT CHANGES

The traditional American family consisted of a husband and wife married for the first time, rearing their biological children, with the male serving as the provider and the female as wife, mother, and homemaker. This ideal continues to serve as a reference point against which contemporary families are judged, despite the fact that many families did not conform to these ideals even during the nostalgic 1950s and early 1960s. In 1960, less than half (43%) of American families conformed to the traditional ideal of single-earner married couples, and nearly one fourth (23%) were dual-earner

TABLE 1. LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18, BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN

Living Arrangement	1960	1970	1980	1989
All races (1,000s)	63,727	69,162	63,427	63,637
Percentage living with:				
Two parents	87.7	85.2	76.7	73.1
One parent	9.1	11.9	19.7	24.3
Mother only	8.0	10.8	18.0	21.5
Father only	1.1	1.1	1.7	2.8
Other relatives	2.5	2.2	3.1	2.1
Nonrelatives only	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.4
White (1,000s)	55,077	58,790	52,242	51,134
Percentage living with:				
Two parents	90.9	89.5	82.7	79.6
Mother only	6.1	7.8	13.5	16.1
Father only	1.0	0.9	1.6	2.7
Other	1.9	1.8	2.2	1.6
Black (1,000s)	8,650	9,422	9,375	9,835
Percentage living with:				
Two parents	67.0	58.5	42.2	38.0
Mother only	19.9	29.5	43.9	51.1
Father only	2.0	2.3	1.9	3.4
Other	11.1	9.7	12.0	7.5
Hispanic (1,000s)	---	4,006	5,459	6,973
Percentage living with:				
Two parents	--	77.7	75.4	67.0
Mother only	--	--	19.6	27.8
Father only	--	--	1.5	2.7
Other	--	--	3.5	2.5

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, March 1988, No. 433, Table A-4; and March 1989, No. 445, Table 4.

Notes: Excludes persons under 18 years old who were maintaining households or families. Blacks compiled as nonwhites in 1960. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Some figures for Hispanics in 1960 and 1970 are not available.

TABLE 2. NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER 18 LIVING WITH ONLY ONE PARENT, BY MARITAL STATUS OF PARENT, RACE, AND HISPANIC ORIGIN

	1959	1989
All children living with one parent (1,000s)	9,165	15,493
Percentage living with single parent who is:		
Never married	—	30.9
Spouse absent	38.7	23.8
Widowed	45.4	6.4
Divorced	14.8	38.9
White children living with one parent (1,000s)	6,466	9,626
Percentage living with single parent who is:		
Never married	—	18.9
Spouse absent	30.2	23.8
Widowed	50.7	7.0
Divorced	17.5	50.3
Black children living with one parent (1,000s)	2,699	5,362
Percentage living with single parent who is:		
Never married	—	53.1
Spouse absent	59.0	23.2
Widowed	32.9	4.6
Divorced	8.1	19.1
Hispanic children living with one parent (1,000s)	...	2,129
Percentage living with single parent who is:		
Never married	..	31.8
Spouse absent	—	35.7
Widowed	...	5.0
Divorced	—	27.5

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, *Family Characteristics of Persons*, March 1959, No. 112, Table 2; and *Marital Status and Living Arrangements*, March 1989, No. 445, Table 5.

Notes: Blacks compiled as nonwhites in 1959. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Some 1959 figures for Hispanics are not available.

couples (Masnick & Bane, 1980). In other respects, however, children's living arrangements were quite consistent with the traditional norm. As Table 1 illustrates, in 1960 the vast majority (nearly 88%) of children under age 18 lived with two parents, only 9% with one parent, and 3% with neither parent. Among blacks, two thirds (67%) of children lived with two parents and 20% lived in mother-only households.

The percentage of single-parent, predominantly female-headed households has increased steadily since the end of World War II. But the most important changes have been in the events and processes associated with the formation and composition of single-parent families. Table 2 indicates that in 1959, the preponderance of single-parent families were headed by widows (45%), three times the percentage headed by divorced parents. These patterns changed quickly over the ensuing three decades. In 1989, the largest percentage (39%) of single-parent families were precipitated by divorce, nearly one third (31%) were headed by never-married parents, one fourth (24%) were characterized as spouse-absent (usually separated), and only 6% were headed by widowed parents. Changes in children's living arrangements have been much more pronounced among blacks. In 1989, never-married parents constituted the largest proportion (53%) of black single parents, 23% were spouse-absent, 19% were divorced, and less than 5% were widowed.

In addition to these changes in single-parent families, the structure and dynamics of two-parent families also have changed in that a sizable number of children are living in stepfamilies, without one of their biological parents. Today, only 7% of American households comprise traditional married couples with an employed father, housewife mother, and two or more school-age children (Otto, 1988). In short, there is now much greater diversity in family structure than 30 years ago. But perhaps more consequential for parent-child relations have been the changes in the factors precipitating different family types, namely changing social values, teenage childbearing, divorce, remarriage, and maternal employment.

To assess the impact of these changes, however, we need to understand typical family experiences and relationships during the baseline period of the 1960s. In what ways were traditional family roles evident during this period, and how have they changed?

### *The Domestic Division of Labor*

In the 1960s, husbands spent an average of 11 hours per week on child care and housework, while wives invested 35 to 40 hours weekly (Coverman & Sheley, 1986; Walker & Woods, 1976). Thus men spent between one third and one fourth the amount of time on domestic labor as their wives, and this pattern persisted regardless of number or ages of children or of wives' employment status. More specific to the focus of this paper, of the 11 hours per week men spent in household labor, only 15 minutes per day (or less than 2 hours per week) were devoted to child care, compared to 54 minutes per day (or more than 6 hours per week) among women (Coverman & Sheley, 1986).

Some modest changes occurred during the 1970s. A number of studies report no overall changes in men's housework and child care time between the 1960s and 1970s, but there were significant decreases in the time women spent on housework (Coverman & Sheley, 1986; Sanik, 1981). There were also noteworthy increases in domestic labor among particular categories of men. Coverman and Sheley found that men under age 30 spent significantly more time in housework in 1975 than in 1965, and men with preschool children increased their child care time significantly. They suggest that changes in this younger segment of the married population may reflect a pattern of changing gender-role socialization, Fleck (1979) reported that by 1977 husbands of employed wives spent a few more hours per week on housework and child care than husbands of nonemployed wives. An analysis of data collected in 1985 indicates further increases in men's housework involvement (Robinson, 1988), but married women continue to spend twice as much time as their husbands on housework and 50% more time in child care (Barnett & Baruch, 1987),

In a study using detailed time diary data collected from married couples with children in 1981, Nock and Kingston (1988) demonstrate the importance of examining parents' work commitments in trying to understand time spent with children. On average workdays, unemployed mothers with preschoolers spend nearly 9 hours each day with their children, more than twice the time of their employed counterparts. The differences are smaller, but still substantial, among families with only school-age children: Unemployed mothers' contact with children averages 6 hours on workdays, compared to a little less than 4 hours for employed mothers. Fathers' contact with children is lower than that of mothers in all family types, averaging 2.5 hours per working day in single-earner and dual-earner families. Corroborating and clarifying the findings of Coverman and Sheley (1986), Nock and Kingston found that in families with young children, fathers with an employed wife spend considerably more time with their children on weekends than fathers with an unemployed wife. As one would expect, employed mothers also spend more time with their children on weekend days than on workdays, partially compensating for loss of time with children during the workweek.

### *Child-Rearing Values*

We also know there have been substantial changes in parental socialization values over the past few decades, with parents in the 1950s and 1960s stressing the importance of obedience in their children and parents in the 1970s and 1980s emphasizing greater personal autonomy and responsibility (Alwin, 1986, 1990). Further, the changes occurred across American families of different religioethnic and socioeconomic categories (Alwin, 1986), and similar changes in parental values have been observed in other industrialized societies (Tromsdorff, 1983). These findings are important because, as discussed below, changes in parent-child relationships are partly due to shifting cultural values regarding traits desired in children.

An important area receiving relatively scarce attention has been the orientation of children toward their parents, Sebald (1986) observed a marked decline in adolescents' orientation toward parents between 1963 and 1976, and a corresponding increase in peer influence over the same period. By 1982 there was a very modest recovery in the valuation of parental opinions, but a continually strengthening trend toward adolescents making decisions independent of parental or peer advice. Sebald concludes that much of the overall decline in importance attached to parental opinions may be attributed to the countercultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and this is certainly a plausible, albeit partial, explanation. Another, perhaps equally important, explanation is that this is the same period during which parents were attributing greater significance to personal autonomy. Viewed in this manner, it is understandable that parental advice is sought (and followed) less

frequently, although adolescents continue to seek parental advice on the most important issues, as discussed below.

In sum, children were much more likely to live with two parents in 1960 than in 1990, and contemporary children living in single-parent families are more likely to be children of unwed mothers or to have experienced family disruption. Children of all ages are more likely to have employed mothers, but women continue to spend significantly more time than their husbands on housework and child care. The traditional American family, to whatever degree it may have existed in the past, is now conspicuous by its absence.

In the next section I consider two of the most important structural changes over the past three decades and how they have influenced parent-child relations. Popular opinion holds that each of these developments has had deleterious consequences for children by reducing the amount of time parents and children spend together. First I consider the consequences of maternal employment for parent-child interaction and children's well-being, then the effects of divorce and single-parent family structure.

## MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS RESTRUCTURING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

### *Maternal Employment and Dual-Earner Families*

Although a recent study shows that most Americans believe that working mothers are detrimental to aspects of children's development and wellbeing (Greenberger, Goldberg, Crawford, & Granger, 1988), reviews of the effects of maternal employment on children demonstrate that mother's employment per se has very few adverse effects and there are, in fact, some positive effects on children's development (e.g., see Bianchi & Spain, 1986; Menaghan & Parcel, 1990; Spitze, 1988a). Importantly, many of the observed effects may be mediated by other variables, notably children's age, sex, social class, and personality characteristics; quality of substitute care (see Belsky, 1990); and mothers' occupational status (Acock, Barker, & Bengtson, 1982; Macke & Morgan, 1978),

Still, there are a number of consistent findings. Maternal employment expands role models for children, fosters egalitarian gender-role attitudes among both sons and daughters, and promotes more positive attitudes toward women and women's employment (Kiecolt & Acock, 1988; Mortimer & Sorensen, 1984; Powell & Steelman, 1982). There are also benefits of employment for mothers' self-esteem, personal efficacy, and overall well-being (Mirowsky & Ross, 1986; Rosenfield, 1989), yielding indirect benefits for children. Children, especially adolescents, often have to assume more personal and domestic responsibilities when their mothers work, which may enhance children's maturity and sense of self-reliance (Amato & Ochiltree, 1986; Hoffman, 1974). An improved standard of living resulting from maternal employment has numerous advantages, especially for children in lower socioeconomic classes. As adults, daughters of employed women are more likely to be employed and to have jobs similar to their mothers' (Stevens & Boyd, 1980).

Indeed, the evidence is sufficiently consistent and persuasive to wonder whether we are asking the most important question. That is, we continue to explore the consequences of mother's employment status in the face of compelling evidence that what is more important for children is the conditions under which mothers and fathers work, namely, substantive complexity of work, levels of supervision, work stress, and role overload (Menaghan & Parcel, 1990). Further, it is often assumed that single mothers must work to support themselves and their children (implying that employment is optional for other women). Regardless of their reasons for working, however, single, employed mothers generally have much lower family income than employed mothers in dual-earner families. The more relevant question in this case (and others) would seem to be the consequences for children of mothers not working, but unfortunately, research on the consequences of maternal employment generally ignores single parents (Spitze, 1988a),

A related question in systematically examining maternal employment concerns the short-and long-term consequences of maternal unemployment in two-parent families. In many cases the wife's income raises the family's status above poverty or from lower- to middle-class (Spitze, 1988b). In addition to social, psychological, and financial benefits stemming from steady employment, there is the preparation, security, and financial stability it provides married women in the event divorce follows, as it often does.

Regarding the quantity or frequency of parent-child interaction, the research evidence described above confirms the popular belief that employed women spend less total time with their children than nonemployed women. However, the amount of time employed mothers spend interacting directly with their children, and the quality of care they provide, are comparable to nonemployed mothers (Nock & Kingston, 1988; Stith & Davis, 1984). Further, both employed women and their husbands spend more time with their children on the weekends than their counterparts in families where the wife is not employed (Nock & Kingston, 1988). Frequently, employed women make time for their children by sacrificing time they would otherwise devote to housework or leisure (Hill & Stafford, 1980). Each of these patterns may be viewed as an indicator of parental support and concern. Even considering lower overall levels of mother-child interaction among employed mothers, it cannot be assumed that this pattern has uniformly deleterious consequences for children. Stated differently, higher levels of interaction between nonemployed mothers and their children may become strenuous for parents and unhealthy for children. Research in the area of family violence, for example, indicates that women employed full-time are less likely to be violent toward their children than mothers with part-time jobs and mothers who are not employed (Gelles, 1987). Employment per se, of course, is a crude indicator of family relations. A more meaningful variable is the level of work and household responsibility. Gelles found that across different employment conditions (part-time, full-time, housewives), "women who reported excess domestic responsibilities had higher rates of violence and abuse than mothers with the same work status who said they had equal or less responsibility than they desired" (p. 94). Viewed in this manner, the problem of mother-child violence may be more accurately described as a function of excessive responsibilities (role strain) rather than one of employment per se.

Further evidence of this interpretation is that full-time employed mothers with nonemployed husbands, women strained by a series of demanding responsibilities, are especially likely to be violent toward their children. Considering fathers, those with employed wives are less likely to be violent, and much less likely to be abusive toward their children, compared to fathers married to nonemployed women. Gelles (1987) suggests that one explanation for this pattern may be that men with nonemployed wives hold traditional beliefs dictating that the man is head of the household and responsible for being the enforcer and disciplinarian, beliefs that often eventuate in violent behavior.

These findings also can be viewed as consistent with the hypothesis that a detached style of parental support has beneficial consequences for children, that is, that parents who are employed spend less time interacting with their children and therefore are at a reduced risk of being violent during the periods when they are with their children. Gelles (1987) found some support for what he termed the time at risk hypothesis: Rates of child abuse were highest among women who would normally spend the most time with their children—housewives with preschool children-- and lowest among those assumed to spend the least time with their children—mothers with full-time jobs.

In sum, despite the fervor with which Americans cling to traditional notions of maternal responsibility for children, children of employed mothers fare no worse on a number of measures of well-being, and in many cases fare better, than children of nonemployed mothers,

### *Divorce and Single-Parent Families*

It is clear that children in the 1990s are much more likely to experience the disruption of their parents' marriage and to live with a single parent than children in the 1960s. Although about one fifth of children in mother-only families have never-married mothers, most children (two thirds) in these families are living with a separated or divorced parent (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). For many, living with one parent will be a long-term arrangement. Over half of the children whose parents divorce spend at least 6 years with only one parent, and the majority of children in single-parent families will live out their childhood without ever entering a second family (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987.) For black children, most will spend the majority of their childhood years in a one-parent family (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987).

Recent reviews of the effects of divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1982) and single-parent family structure (Cashion, 1984; McLanahan & Booth, 1989) indicate that these developments have some adverse effects on children, but that the effects attributable to divorce or living in a single-parent family (rather than to other factors) are not nearly as dramatic or as permanent as popularly believed. Further, divorce and living in a single-parent family are two different experiences for children and affect them in different ways.

Although popular and clinical impressions suggest that children of divorce suffer long-term deleterious effects, research on nonclinical populations consistently shows that children experience short-term emotional adjustments and that older children typically have an easier time adjusting than younger children (Hetherington et al., 1983). In addition, there is abundant evidence that levels of family conflict are more important than type of family structure for understanding children's adjustment, self-esteem, and other measures of psychological well-being (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Emery, 1982; Raschke & Raschke, 1979). Other studies indicate that children's physical well-being is unaffected by divorce, that frequent marital and family conflict in so-called intact families is detrimental to children's physical health, and that divorce may, in fact, insulate some children and adolescents from prolonged exposure to health-threatening family interactions (Gottman & Katz, 1989; Mechanic & Hansel, 1989). Of course, the term intact itself may be just as accurate in describing many one-parent families, particularly those with no history (or recent history) of marital disruption.

Nonetheless, children living in mother-only families fare worse on measures of intellectual performance and educational attainment (Hetherington et al., 1983; Keith & Finlay, 1988; McLanahan, 1985) and exhibit higher rates of sexual and delinquent activity. One explanation for the latter finding is that levels of parental supervision and control are lower in single-parent families, allowing adolescents more opportunities to make decisions independent of parental input (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Newcomer & Wry, 1987). In addition, Nock (1988) proposes that the absence of generational boundaries and hierarchical authority relations in single-parent families represents socialization deficits that result in lower educational and occupational attainment as adults. The most serious consequences, however, are those related to severe and often long-lasting financial problems suffered by women and children in single-parent families. Compared to children living with both parents, those in mother-only families are five times as likely to be living below the poverty threshold (47% versus 9%); for black children, three of every five in mother-child families are living in poverty (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Further, and of central importance to the focus of this paper, since 1967 the economic wellbeing of mother-only families has worsened vis-a-vis other family types (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Economic hardship has dire consequences for parents and children, including lower levels of parental nurturance, inconsistent discipline, and adolescent distress (Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989).

Again, recognizing that methodological limitations restrict our understanding of the processes most directly impinging on children in single-parent families (see Blechman, 1982; Demo & Acock, 1988), the accumulated evidence is sufficiently consistent to wonder whether we, as researchers, are asking the most important questions, or whether we, like the families we are trying to study, are more strongly influenced by traditional notions of family normality. A substantial amount of effort has been expended trying to isolate the effects of divorce and single-parent family structure, but relatively little effort has been expended trying to understand the correlates and consequences of persistent marital and family conflict across family types and across stages of individual and family development. Indeed, reviews of the literature demonstrate that it is precisely these experiences, conflict in marital and parent-child relationships, that mediate the effect of family structure on children's well-being (Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1982; also see Booth & Edwards, 1989, for an empirical illustration). Whether living with one parent or two, and whether living with biological parents or stepparents, family processes are critical to children's development and well-being.

One such family process is parental supervision and control. The documented pattern of lower levels of parental supervision in single-parent families is both important and understandable, but how are we to interpret it? Often these findings are interpreted as problems inherent in single-parent families, inevitable consequences of deviation from traditional marriage and family patterns. Viewed from a different perspective, however, the key to understanding these families and the consequences for children may be by examining processes such as

participation and support by absent fathers. Long-term single parenting, usually performed by employed women, is a chronic stressor (Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). Yet visitation, involvement, and financial support by absent fathers are minimal. Using national survey data, Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison (1987) report that more than two fifths of absent, biological fathers had no contact with their children in the preceding year, and three fifths provided no financial support (also see Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Importantly, in families where paternal economic support was provided, the likelihood of adolescent problem behavior was reduced.

In short, the pattern of findings described here provides compelling evidence that children, although certainly affected by divorce and single-parent family structure, are more profoundly influenced by socioeconomic resources and by the degree of involvement, support, and discipline provided by their parents. Many of our research questions and concepts continue to reflect traditional notions of marriage and family, blurring our understanding of the linkages between family structure, family interaction, and child outcomes. Divorce and single-parent families have been dramatic developments over the past three decades, but the evidence at hand suggests they may not be as important for children's well-being as paternal abandonment, neglect, and failure to pay child support.

Having addressed some of the major developments restructuring parent-child relationships, I now assess the current state of these relationships in terms of the regularity and quality of interaction.

#### CURRENT STATE OF PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

Has the rapid pace of social and demographic change over the past three decades created profound discontinuities between the values of parents and children? How do parents view their children, and how do children perceive their parents? How much time do parents and children spend together, and is it quality time? In families where fathers are present, has their involvement in parenting changed? How pervasive are conflict and violence in contemporary parent-child relations?

##### *Values and Attitudes*

Contrary to popular myth, the bulk of evidence indicates that parents continue to value children positively, that children provide meaningful sources of happiness and social support, and that parents remain very influential in the transmission of values, especially on important issues (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 1987; Offer, Ostrov, Howard, & Atkinson, 1988; Sebald, 1986). In fact, as Acock and Bengtson (1980) have observed, the "generation gap" may be considered a social construction of reality in the sense that perceived differences between the attitudes of parents and children are much greater than actual differences. However, it appears that children generally acquire the values and attitudes they attribute to their parents, or attitudes that parents wish to instill or communicate, which may or may not correspond to parents' actual values and attitudes.

Studying a sample of parents, Meredith, Stinnett, and Cacioppo (1985) found that the majority judged parenting to be a very positive and satisfying experience. Among the greatest sources of satisfaction reported by parents were watching children grow and develop, loving their children, taking pride in their achievements, sharing experiences, passing on values, and experiencing the feeling of being part of a family. A similarly strong pattern of parental satisfaction was observed 30 years ago by Miller and Swanson (1958).

Adolescents' perceptions of parents also tend to be positive. Recent data indicate that between two thirds and three fourths of adolescents feel close to their parents, identify with them, and are satisfied with the way they get along (Bachman et al., 1987; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). However, parents view the relationships as more positive and the conflicts as less severe than adolescents (Montemayor, 1986; Smetana, 1989). It is widely documented that disagreements occur regularly, especially in mid-adolescence, but that they tend to be minor and to concern mundane, everyday issues (Montemayor, 1986; also see Collins, 1990, for an excellent review). Furthermore, disagreements of this type may be viewed as adaptive in the sense that relationships are renegotiated regularly, facilitating adolescent adjustment and individuation (Holmbeck & O'Donnell, 1991).

##### *Parental Involvement*



In assessing actual parenting behavior, researchers have distinguished three types of parental involvement: engagement (direct, one-on-one interaction), accessibility (being nearby and available to meet a child's need), and responsibility (being accountable for the child's care and welfare) (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987; LaRossa, 1988). In general, the data indicate low levels of parental engagement. The one exception, as discussed earlier, is mothers who are not employed outside the home; they have roughly twice the amount of direct contact with their children compared to employed mothers. Across family types, fathers' time with children is roughly two thirds that of mothers. Although most studies of paternal interaction involve infants and toddlers, there is evidence that children's age has an important influence on the proportion of time fathers spend in activities with their children. Studies consistently find very low levels of paternal engagement with infants (e.g., Frodi & Lamb, 1978; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981), more frequent direct interaction with school-age children, and about the same amount of time interacting with adolescents as mothers spend, which is usually 1 hour per day (Montemayor, 1982).

However, these findings conceal more dramatic differences in parenting behavior. First, mothers continue to bear most of the child care responsibilities for young children (age 5 and under). Nock and Kingston (1988) show that fathers of preschoolers, who average 2.5 to 3 hours per workday in contact with their children, spend only about 15 minutes per day in child care; on weekends it doubles to about 30 minutes per day. Mothers of preschoolers, on the other hand, average 1 to 1.5 hours each day directly caring for young children.

With older (school-age) children, however, child care is an almost insignificant aspect of parent-child interaction, involving no more than 30 minutes for mothers or fathers. Among these families, there are only modest mother-father differences in amount of time spent in various parent-child activities. On a typical weekend day, mothers and fathers each spend about 2 hours having fun with children at museums, movies, and so forth, an hour watching television with them, and between 30 minutes and an hour eating meals with them. On average, mothers and fathers engage in no more than 10 minutes per day of direct conversation with their older children, and no more than 16 minutes talking with their preschool children.

Further, mothers spend substantially more time alone with children than fathers do. In a study of parents of kindergartners and fourth-graders, Barnett and Baruch (1987) observe that fathers spend an average of 30 hours per week in total interaction time with children, and mothers spend 45 hours (or 50% more). In terms of time alone with children, however, fathers average only 5.5 hours per week while mothers average 19.5 hours (or 350% more).

Thus, as LaRossa (1988) has observed, there has not been as much change in fathering behavior as there has been in the culture of fatherhood, that is, the norms, values, and beliefs concerning fathering. In most contemporary families it is the mothers who are more directly involved in child-rearing responsibilities. Rather than signifying recent changes in parenting, these patterns signify the continuation of structural arrangements dating back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries whereby mothers (or female substitutes) are primarily responsible for childhood care and socialization (Vinovskis, 1987).

### *Violence Between Parents and Children*

Straus and Gelles (1986) estimated that in 1975, nearly 4% of children aged 3 to 17 living with two parents, or approximately 1.5 million children, were abused by their parents. By 1985, they reported a 47% decline in the most severe violent acts. Although overall rates of violence did not change over the 10-year period, the researchers speculate that significant decreases in the most severe forms of violence indicate that parents' consciousness has been raised concerning the inappropriateness of abusive behavior.

Some categories of children remain vulnerable, however. Young children and children in poor and disadvantaged families are more likely to be victimized (Straus & Gelles, 1986). While violence toward children in the general (predominantly white) sample declined significantly from 1975 to 1985, among blacks minor and severe parent-to-child violence increased slightly (Hampton, Gelles, & Harrop, 1989). In addition,

most cases of sexual abuse of children are perpetrated by parents, most often biological fathers victimizing their daughters (Finkelhor, 1979; VanderMey & Neff, 1984).

Another grim reflection on parent-child relations is the occurrence of child-to-parent violence. Using 1975 data on two-parent households, Gelles (1987) conservatively estimated that each year at least 9% of parents of children aged 10 to 17 (or nearly 3 million parents) are victims of violence perpetrated by their own children. Mothers were more likely than fathers to be victims, especially in cases of severe violence and parent abuse (also see Agnew & Huguley, 1989).

Reflecting the intergenerational transmission of violence, the severity of violence directed toward parents is directly related both to the severity of violence experienced by the child and to the severity of interspousal violence the child has observed (Gelles, 1987). Gelles interprets these findings as evidence that mothers are at greater risk of violence because they spend more time with their children than fathers do, because they lack the physical and social resources to defend themselves, and, perhaps most importantly, because children have observed their mothers being abused by their fathers and they "learn that mothers are an appropriate and acceptable target for intrafamily violence" (p. 165).

#### TOWARD A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF PARENTAL SUPPORT

Across diverse family structures and across numerous domains of parent-child relations, the evidence reviewed above suggests a consistent pattern of supportive detachment in contemporary parent-child relationships. There are two noteworthy exceptions to this pattern: abusive parents and absent fathers. Most parents, however, are highly supportive in that they love their children, consider their children to be important, invest years of nurturance, protection, and guidance in rearing and disciplining their children, and typically succeed quite well in transmitting norms and values from one generation to the next, especially values regarding important issues. On the other hand, however, parents also tend to be detached from their children in the sense that direct interaction is severely restricted by the substantial periods of time children spend in day-care settings, schools, before- and after-school programs, and camps; the time children spend with peers and babysitters and the countless hours they spend simply watching television (or playing video games); and by the physical absence of parents (most often fathers). The result is that although parents typically support their children, both emotionally and financially, for extended periods of the life course, the child-rearing years are characterized by low levels of face-to-face participation in shared activities.

Although contact between parents and children is reduced by the high incidence of divorce and single-parent families (most importantly, low rates of visitation by nonresident fathers), by maternal and paternal employment, and by reliance on child care by nonrelatives, the detachment in general is not an uncaring or uninvolved detachment. Parents in modern society spend substantial amounts of time at work to provide for the financial needs of the family, and mothers especially are expected to complete various domestic tasks in their strenuous triple role of wife, mother, and homemaker (Menaghan & Parcel, 1990). Le-Masters and DeFrain (1989) note that American mothers are in addition expected to be home managers, community liaisons, and family decision makers, and that as a result of ever-increasing demands and responsibilities, they are generally overcommitted. It is also clear that parental support and influence are exerted indirectly through structuring children's relationships in extrafamilial contexts, as illustrated in parental monitoring of friendship choices, peer activities, and dating patterns, decisions to live in certain neighborhoods so that children will attend particular schools, or selection of day-care environments.

Popular claims that parents do not care about their children also are misleading. The evidence suggests that most parents care deeply, although often from a distance. Greenberger and O'Neill (1990) report that employed parents' concerns about their children (concerns about the consequences of maternal employment, perceived quality of child care, and their children's problem behaviors) have adverse effects on parental feelings about work and general well-being (role strain, depression, and physical health). Unexpectedly, they find that fathers are more strongly influenced than mothers by concerns about their children. Although child-related concerns clearly operate as stressors for both men and women, the concerns vary in nature and consequences.

Greenberger and O'Neill document that quality of child care is a better predictor of women's well-being, that men in dual-earner households are more likely than women to believe that maternal employment has negative consequences for children (also see Greenberger et al., 1988), and that men are particularly vulnerable to role strain, depression, and ill health when they view their children's behavior as problematic.

The position taken here is that supportive detachment is a useful concept for understanding parent-child interaction. Rather than viewing the parental role as dichotomous—either parents are concerned, supportive, devoted, and conscientious, or they are uncaring, uninvolved, and abusive --the evidence suggests that parental support has taken on a new meaning in American society and that often it is executed in a detached rather than a direct, face-to-face manner. Further, supportive detachment as a child-rearing and socialization process is likely to be associated with certain positive and negative consequences for children, just as other child-rearing processes have desirable and undesirable outcomes. To illustrate, at the same time that parents work to support themselves and their family, they simultaneously foster self-regulation in children and adolescents who will depend on such attributes for life in the family and the larger society in which they will live as adults. As discussed above, parents are much more likely now than 30 years ago to emphasize autonomy for their children and to de-emphasize conformity. Parents are also likely to adhere to new norms supporting their own adult development and self-fulfillment (Bellah, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Schnaiberg & Goldenberg, 1989). These well-documented changes in American cultural and parenting values are consistent with parenting behaviors and childhood role experiences that socialize children for independence and self-reliance (see Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

## CONCLUSIONS

It seems clear that the well-being of American children has declined since 1960. Uhlenberg and Eggebeen (1986) observe that between 1960 and 1980, academic achievement scores dropped, while rates of delinquency, illegitimacy, abortion, and alcohol and drug use increased dramatically. During the same period, adolescent mortality rates increased, largely as a result of sharp increases in death rates due to homicide, suicide, and other violent causes. Like many others, the authors attribute these patterns to the declining commitment of parents, increased labor force participation, divorce, and a general "erosion of the bond between parent and child" (Uhlenberg & Eggebeen, 1986, p. 38).

The evidence reviewed here suggests that this conclusion, while partially accurate, is vastly overstated. To be sure, parental support is weakened by low levels of direct interaction with children. As a result, children are disadvantaged. Of particular concern in this regard is the widespread occurrence of paternal abandonment and neglect, the latter commonly occurring both in father-absent and father-present families. However, there is persuasive evidence that maternal employment and parental divorce can not be equated with lack of parental commitment, and that both have been exaggerated as causes of distress and maladjustment in children.

The ever-increasing diversity of American families requires that we broaden our research agenda beyond traditional concepts and notions of family normality. Children's well-being depends much more on enduring parental support and satisfying family relationships than it does on a particular family structure. Classifications relying on the number of parents in the household, or the number of employed parents, provide, at best, crude indicators of family relations and the larger social context. As one illustration, children living with a single parent, especially black children, are much more likely than children in two-parent families to have other relatives living with them (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Dornbusch et al. (1985) found that the presence of an additional adult facilitated supervision and control of adolescent behavior in mother-only households, reducing rates of delinquent behavior. Another explanation is that in such households the presence of another adult creates a more hierarchical authority structure within which children learn deference and conformity (Nock, 1988).

More consequential than family type for children's well-being is the quality of parent-child and other family relationships. Lack of parental supervision and control, persistent parent-child conflict, marital conflict, and family violence have lasting deleterious consequences for children of all family types. Yet it seems clear that,

with the exception of marital conflict, these patterns are more common in single-parent families, and that they are precipitated by economic hardship. The linkages between socioeconomic resources, family processes, and child outcomes require much more systematic attention from researchers.

The extent and degree of parent-child conflict are widely exaggerated. Adolescents generally report close and satisfying relationships with parents, and they routinely turn to parents for advice and guidance on important decisions. Parents, in turn, tend to be concerned about their children's welfare; they report that some stages and events in parenthood are stressful, but they maintain that it is a satisfying experience. Even during the empty nest phase, parents' life satisfaction depends on frequent contact with their children (White & Edwards, 1990).

Perhaps one reason parents and adolescents report generally favorable relationships is that they spend very little time together, often no more than 1 hour per day of direct interaction. It may be that more time together is not always and necessarily better for children, or for their families. The restructuring of work and family roles over the past few decades has ushered in a more detached but still supportive role for contemporary parents. Compared to parents a generation earlier, adults today spend less time rearing dependent-aged children but more time caring for their elderly parents. In sum, although other work and family expectations have expanded, there has been no corresponding delimitation of the parental role.

Parent-child relations have changed, but not as significantly as many assume and not all for the worse. Socialization processes involving supportive detachment prepare children for the changing society in which they will live as adults. Childhood experiences in single-parent families and stepfamilies and with extended kin provide socialization for experiences in reciprocal roles later in the life course. There is every indication that parenthood continues to be highly valued. But it is equally clear that parents and children need to find more time to spend with each other if they are to reap the many benefits of close parent-child relations.

#### NOTE

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