



## Closing the parenting gap

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation certainly raised eyebrows this month with their interview of UK professor Adam Swift. He said that loving families who privilege their children by doing such things as reading them bedtime stories are causing societal inequality. This is what Swift and American based co-author Harry Brighouse argue in their recent book *Family Values: The ethics of parent-child relationships*.<sup>1</sup> As they

pursue a vision of equalitarian justice, the philosophers question the level of authority parents should have over their children.

Their provocative proposal is to level the playing field by choosing which parental activities are acceptable. Bedtime stories are in, since they foster emotional bonds. Private schools are out, since they give an academic advantage without enriching family relationships. The whole philosophical exercise attempts to uphold something valuable about family while poking at its structure and function.

### The “soft capital” of family life

As startling as their argument is, Brighouse and Swift know that family function contributes to social mobility and economic well-being. The current Canadian focus on the middle class uses income as the measure of a family’s well-being. Certainly, income matters, but the soft benefits derived from family functioning are just as important to future outcomes. In many ways, income and the soft capital Brighouse and Swift identify in family life are correlated. This point is rarely expanded on in Canadian public policy debates.

One element of family function that has a real impact on children is family structure. Professor Thomas DeLeire of University of Wisconsin-Madison and Professor Leonard Lopoo of Syracuse University collaborated on a paper for the *Economic Mobility Project*, published in 2010. They declared, “The structure of the family in which a child grows up could have as large an impact as income, or larger, on subsequent economic outcomes. Numerous studies have found that family structure matters.”<sup>2</sup>

Family structure and income, while both important, are connected. Most Canadians know that lone-parent families are at a greater risk of poverty. Over previous decades, policy initiatives have reduced levels of lone-parent poverty. But a 2014 IMFC study found that income is closely linked to marriage in this country, and that top income earners are very likely to be married, while low income earners are very likely to be unmarried. The share of married families among middle and lower income Canadians has been generally declining over the last three decades.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, family form can also offer a buffer against disadvantages associated with low income. Recent research shows that teens from intact, married families have better odds of achieving educational success and fiscal well-being, even when they come from less economically privileged homes.<sup>4</sup>

### The parenting gap

The internal strengths found in some families led Swift, the UK based philosopher, to question whether it was fair that some children would benefit more than others. He explained to ABC journalist Joe Gelonesi, "I had done some work on social mobility and the evidence is overwhelming that the reason why children born to different families have different chances in life is because of what happens in those families."<sup>5</sup>

Scholars are now concerned that differences in family structures are creating a parenting gap between the economically privileged and the disadvantaged. Even small things that parents do, like sharing meals together and reading to children daily, have been correlated to future success.<sup>6</sup>

Of course (and fortunately, we might add,) family structure is not destiny. Successful people come from all kinds of family backgrounds. There is no perfect family, but when family formation is examined on the whole, it is clear that it remains an important variable to consider.

Guillaume Vandenbroucke, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, recently argued that economists and policymakers *should* pay attention to living arrangements and household composition. Vandenbroucke argues that household composition helps explain labour force participation, relative earnings and other economic measures and behaviours.<sup>7</sup> Studies have shown that economic behaviours differ between married and common-law couples.<sup>8</sup> Family transitions like divorce also have significant impact on personal finances.<sup>9</sup> How Canadians structure their households influences their economic behaviour.

The Canadian conversation on social mobility and income disparity would be enhanced by looking at the role of family. But the answer is not for the state to choose which parental activities should be compelled or allowed. Rather, we should think about how public policy and other sectors can empower parents as they steward the development of their children.

In other words, how can we make it so that more kids get a bedtime story from their parents?

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<sup>1</sup> Gelonesi, J. (2015, May 1). Is having a loving family an unfair advantage? ABC Radio Nation – Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/new-family-values/6437058>

<sup>2</sup> DeLeire, T. & Lopoo, L.M. (2010, April). Family structure and the economic mobility of children. *The Economic Mobility Project*. Washington D.C.: Pew Charitable Trust. p. 4. Retrieved from [http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs\\_assets/2010/FamilyStructurepdf.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2010/FamilyStructurepdf.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Cross, P. & Mitchell, P.J. (2014, February). The marriage gap between rich and poor Canadians. Ottawa: IMFC. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/event/CMD-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Wilcox, B. (2013, October 29). Marriage makes our children richer. Here's why. *The Atlantic Monthly*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/10/marriage-makes-our-children-richer-heres-why/280930/>

<sup>5</sup> Gelonesi, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Lugaila, T. (2003, August). A child's day: 2000. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p70-89.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Vandenbroucke, G. (2015, April). Living arrangements matter not just to your parents but also to policymakers. *The Regional Economist*. St. Louis: The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. p. 12. Retrieved from <https://www.stlouisfed.org/~media/Publications/Regional%20Economist/2015/April/arrangements.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Hamplova, D, Le Bourdais, C., & Lapierre-Adamcyk, É. (2014). Is cohabitation-marriage gap in money pooling universal? *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, pp. 983-997.

<sup>9</sup> Gadalla, T.M. (2009). Impact of marital dissolution on men's and women's incomes: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50.