



What mom really wants: A marriage proposal

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A stream of celebrities will celebrate Mother's Day tomorrow -- Jessica Alba is showing off her bump, and Nicole Richie appeared on the cover of People with her new daughter.

What neither of these women will celebrate this year is their wedding anniversary. They are unmarried mothers, and no one notices. Once taboo, motherhood before marriage is now par for the course, just another lifestyle choice.

"Lone parenthood" -- more than 80% of these families are headed by women -- is on the rise everywhere and Canada is no exception. In 1970 only one in 10 Canadian babies was born to an unmarried mother; today that number is one in three. Yet in our anything-goes culture, the question for many is, "Why should we care?"

No one's calling for a return to social ostracism -- the term "bastard" has rightfully been retired. But unmarried parenting only looks glamorous when Halle Berry does it. The facts: Wealthy or poor, children who do not live with their own married parents are twice as likely to repeat grades, to experience physical and mental health problems, to break the law, to become unmarried parents themselves and to develop behavioural problems like aggression and hyperactivity.

In Canada, children born to single mothers are more likely to live in poverty, suffer neglect and abuse, and have childhoods marked by instability. Approximately one-third of children of single parents live in poverty, while only about 6% of married parent families in Canada are poor.

Neither does living with your boyfriend help. In fact, on some scales it makes things worse. According to one British study, a live-in boyfriend or stepfather is the most serious risk factor for child abuse, increasing that risk by up to 33 times. Domestic abuse happens most often in households with single, cohabiting or divorced parents.

Essential for children

Collectively, we prefer not to discuss these details. But the result of our reticence to look at the facts is a young generation completely unaware that marriage has societal and individual benefits, and that it is absolutely essential for children. No young woman can afford not to know this information about the importance of marriage.

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For those unconvinced about poor social outcomes, perhaps fiscal realities will hit home.

A major academic study released in April calculates the cost of divorce and unwed childbearing to American taxpayers. Using conservative economic estimates the researchers show how family breakdown and unmarried childbearing costs all of us through poverty, costs to social programs, even involvement with the criminal justice system -- all of which are higher for children brought up without fathers in the home.

Due to increased government spending and decreased tax revenues, this study pegged the annual cost of divorce and non-marital births at \$112 billion annually. Given Canada's extensive social programs, our per capita costs would be at least as high.

Not every family form works just fine for children. Common sense tells us families with two parents bring more resources to their parenting, since a mom and a dad can share responsibility. Kids are generally aware of the absence of a parent, and feel it acutely. Biological parents invest in children more readily than step-parents. And live-in partners and boyfriends, guidance counsellors, psychologists, parole officers and community-based social programs do a poor job of filling the gap left by an absent father.

Then there are the benefits of marriage for parents, in particular women. Married women are less likely to be abused or suffer from depression and they report better relationships with their kids than their divorced or never-married counterparts.

Better sex lives

There's also sex: Despite the image of the swinging single, married couples tend to have more satisfying sex lives than people in any other kind of relationship.

Certainly, we understand that some unions go wrong. Even so, compassion for different circumstances should not mean relegating the traditional family to some dustbin of history -- 69% of Canadian families are still, even today, precisely that. Married parents make strong families, and these are important for our society's success.

Those celebrities look glamorous, but that's an illusion obtained through money, fame, soft lights and a fair amount of airbrushing.

The ideal Mother's Day present, whether in Hollywood or amongst mere mortals, might just be that other staple of glossy celebrity magazines -- a marriage proposal.