



# UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM: News You Can Use, 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Edition

A Survey of Recent Family Research and  
Clinical Findings Prepared for the  
Council on Contemporary Families

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 UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI  
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## Unconventional Wisdom: News You Can Use

CCF's annual "Unconventional Wisdom" is a collection of member submissions and recent briefing papers prepared for the Council. Although Unconventional Wisdom does not include the publications of all those represented here, this document provides the contact information for members for readers to contact them directly.

The current Unconventional Wisdom is a survey of recent family research and clinical findings prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families' 15th Anniversary Conference, *Crossing Boundaries: Public and Private Roles in Assuring Child Well-Being*, at the Crowne Plaza Chicago Metro Hotel, April 27 and 28, 2012.

### Executive Summary

In preparation for the Council on Contemporary Families' 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, *Crossing Boundaries: Public and Private Roles in Assuring Child Well-Being*, at the Crown Plaza Chicago Metro Hotel, April 27 and 28, 2012, the Council asked conference participants to submit short descriptions of recent research and best practice findings relevant to child well-being, for the Fifth Edition of "Unconventional Wisdom." Here are some highlights of the 37 submissions CCF received.

#### **Sexual mores and behaviors: Some things change, some things stay the same...**

- Sharon Sassler (Cornell University) reports that the rapid progress of couples toward sexual intimacy has been a consistent pattern reaching back at least four decades. But the increasing age at first marriage means that the period between initiating sexual involvement and getting married has become considerably longer, with cohabitation an intervening stage in the majority of new marriages.
- Past studies found that couples who cohabited before marriage had a greater chance of divorce than those who entered directly into marriage. But Wendy Manning (Bowling Green State University) shows that for couples married since 1996, cohabitation before marriage is not associated with an elevated risk of marital dissolution. In fact, among the subgroup of women facing the greatest risk of divorce, cohabitation after engagement but before marriage is now tied to *lower* odds of marital instability.

#### **Who has it better (or worse?) - employed moms or stay-at-home moms?**

- Judith Treas (University of California Irvine), reports that surveys of married women in 28 countries show full-time homemakers and part-time employed wives with a small overall advantage over full-time working wives in general life satisfaction. However, the gap narrows in countries with social policies supporting working mothers.
- But Rachel Gordon (University of Illinois-Chicago) and Margaret Usdansky (Syracuse University) show that the happiness of new moms depends on both their work-and-family preferences *and* their job options. Women who prefer to work and have high-

quality jobs have as few depressive symptoms as women who are homemakers by choice. Women who are homemakers but would prefer to work are at much higher risk of depression, as are women who work low-quality jobs, even if they want to work. But employed women who would prefer to stay home have few depressive symptoms if they have high-quality jobs.

- Suzanne Bianchi (UCLA) reports that the majority of new mothers now return to work within 6 months of having their first child. Paula England (NYU) points out that although highly educated mothers are more likely to return to work, they also spend more time in childcare than their less-educated counterparts.

### **Class matters more than ever**

Sean Reardon (Stanford University) notes that the academic achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is 40 percent higher today than it was 25 years ago. Fifty years ago, the achievement gap between blacks and white was twice as large as the gap between rich and poor. Today the income-achievement gap is nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap.

### **But racial and cultural differences remain important**

- Conference keynoter Dorothy Roberts (Northwestern University School of Law), points out that black children are more likely than white children to be placed in foster care, take longer to be reunified with their parents, and are more likely to have the legal ties to their families permanently severed.
- Alan Detloff (University of Illinois-Chicago) shows that even after controlling for poverty, family structure, and other risk factors, race remains an independent predictor of the over-representation of African-American children in the child welfare system.

Virginia Rutter  
Board Member  
Council on Contemporary Families

## Unconventional Wisdom: News You Can Use

### 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Edition

Edited by Joshua Coleman, Co-Chair, Council on Contemporary Families, and Stephanie Coontz, Co-Chair and Director of Research and Public Education, Council on Contemporary Families.

#### **New Findings on Premarital Cohabitation and Divorce Risk**

For many years, scholars consistently found that couples who cohabited before marriage had a greater chance of divorce than those who entered directly into marriage. But when we looked at couples married since 1996, we found that this older association no longer prevails. For couples married since the mid-1990s, cohabitation before marriage is not associated with an elevated risk of marital dissolution. In fact, among a subgroup of women facing the greatest risk of divorce, cohabitation with definite plans to marry at the outset was tied to *lower* levels of marital instability.

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#### **An Earlier Re-entry into the Workforce for Mothers**

Mothers today work during pregnancy more often and return to work much sooner after the birth of a child than did mothers half a century ago. During 1961-1965 the share of women working during their first pregnancy was 44 percent; by 2001-03 it had climbed to two-thirds, based on data collected in the Survey of Income and Program Participation. More dramatic was the change in the speed at which women returned to work after the birth of their child. Among all women having their first child during the early 1960s, only 10 percent were back at work three months after the baby's birth. By 2001-03, 42 percent of such mothers were back at work three months after the child's birth. The majority of first-time moms (55 percent) were back at work six months after the birth, and almost two-thirds (64 percent) had returned to the job by the child's first birthday.

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#### **Income Rather than Education or Race Now Best Predicts Children's Academic Achievement**

The academic achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is roughly 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier. Moreover, the income-achievement gap is now nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap. Fifty years ago, in contrast, the black-white gap was twice as large as the income gap.

The income gap appears to have grown at least partly because of an increase in the achievement returns to income for families above the median income level: a given difference in family incomes now corresponds to a 30 to 60 percent larger difference in achievement than it did for children born in the 1970s. This growing income-achievement gap does not appear to be a result of a growing achievement gap between children with highly and less-educated parents. Family income is now nearly as strong as parental

education in predicting children's achievement. Evidence from other studies suggests that this may be in part a result of increasing parental investment in children's cognitive development.

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### **Are Homemakers Happier than Working Wives? It's Complicated**

Do women find personal fulfillment in their jobs, or are competing work and family obligations a formula for misery? Is housework drudgery, or is caring for home and family a meaningful and rewarding activity? The answer is more complicated than one might think. One recent study using European data found that spending more time on housework and less in paid work was associated with higher levels of psychological distress for women. But our studies of general life satisfaction among married women aged 18 to 65 in 28 countries shows that full-time homemakers eke out a slight advantage in happiness over wives employed full-time. The differences are small, however, and full-time homemakers are no happier than married women working part-time for pay. The existence of social policies supporting working women, such as public childcare, tends to level the playing field, narrowing the gap in happiness between home-makers and full-time working wives. Judith Treas, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, jktreas@uci.edu, 949-824-8324

### **Depression Among Moms: More Complications**

The happiness of new moms depends on both their work-and-family preferences *and* their job options. Job quality affects mothers regardless of whether they'd prefer to join the workforce or stay home: Mothers in low-quality jobs with few advancement opportunities are at high risk of becoming depressed even if they prefer paid work; those in high-quality jobs with adequate earnings and respect are at low risk of depression even if they'd rather stay home. In contrast, whether mothers are depressed when they don't have a job depends on their preferences: Those who would rather be working have high depression levels -- as high as those working in low quality jobs. And those who are happy to stay home have low depression levels -- as low as those working in high quality jobs. These findings suggest that one-size-fits all arguments about whether mothers should work for pay or stay at home are overly simplistic. Women need to consider their personal desires, their financial needs, and the quality of the jobs available to them.

Rachel Gordon, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago, ragordon@uic.edu, (312) 413-0295 and Margaret L. Usdansky, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Syracuse University, mlusdans@maxwell.syr.edu, (315) 443-5765

### **Why Do More Educated Parents Spend More Time with Their Kids?**

More educated moms and dads spend more hours per week taking care of their children than their less educated counterparts. Why is this? For women, we might think that the key would be that college-educated women are married to college-educated men whose high earnings allow their wives to stay home with their kids instead of taking a job. But this isn't the reason; college-educated women spend more time with children despite more of them being employed. We might think that the reason those with more education do more child care is that they have more income, allowing them to outsource housework, leaving

more time for kids; but research in progress using the American Time Use Survey shows that higher income is not the explanation. Our research is still in search of the explanation, which may lie in different cultural conceptions of what is best for kids.

Paula England, Professor of Sociology, New York University, pengland@nyu.edu

### **Has the Recession Set Back Support for Gender Equality?**

During the Great Depression, the entry of wives into the work force led to increased hostility toward working wives and decreased support for gender equality. Is something similar occurring in the midst of this global economic crisis? Drawing upon data from the European Social Survey, we compared attitudes toward gender equality in work and family life in 2004, prior to the recession, and in 2008, after it had well begun. We found that support for gender equality in work and family life continued to increase during the recession, often quite dramatically. In all but one of the 13 countries surveyed (Spain), there was a substantial decline in agreement with the view that women should be prepared to leave paid work for the sake of the family. And in all 13 countries, there was a significant decrease in the traditional view that men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce.

Professor Neil Gilbert, School of Social Welfare, U.C. Berkeley ngilbert@berkeley.edu, 510 642 4362 and Professor Jing Guo, School of Social Work, University of Hawaii jingguo@hawaii.edu

### **How Do Today's Children Understand Race?**

Has the post civil rights era produced a generation of kids that are blind to issues of race? To answer these questions, we interviewed an unusual group of children, 44 of whom attended integrated schools, a rare phenomenon in contemporary American society. Our aim was to understand how a racially diverse group of middle school children, who actually learn and play with one another, talk about what race means to them. We find that while some use colorblind rhetoric, most children in our study tell us that race matters. Some talk about race in terms of inequality and unfairness, while others offer stories of cultural difference based on racial identity.

Our interviews suggest that among white children, girls but not boys talk about race in terms of inequality. Among non-white children, class helps determine how they talk about race. Middle-class children of color are far more likely to explain race in terms of culture, while non-white kids from working class families talk about racial inequality and discrimination.

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### **The Costs of Breastfeeding**

Pediatricians often encourage new mothers to breastfeed their infants for at least the first six months of their infants' lives because of the health advantages for both mothers and their infants. An additional argument is that breastfeeding has financial advantages over formula-feeding because it is free. The implication is that mothers who do not breastfeed are acting out of ignorance. But is breast-feeding truly free? Our analysis, based on nationally representative data, reveals that among first-time mothers who were employed in the year before their first child, those who breastfeed for six months or longer

experience a steeper decline in their annual income, on average, than do mothers who breastfeed for shorter durations or not at all.

Why is this? In the US, most mothers of young children work outside the home. Most do not receive paid maternity leave, nor are they extended the right to take breaks to breastfeed their babies. As a result, mothers who breastfeed for six months or longer are more likely to switch to part-time work or quit work entirely, while mothers who cannot afford to do so are less likely to breastfeed. If the U.S. government wants to promote health and wellbeing for mothers and their infants through breastfeeding, it should consider federal legislation to protect the rights of all mothers to breastfeed at the workplace and compensate them for the unpaid labor associated with this type of infant feeding.

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### **The Racial Geography of Child Welfare**

Although African American children are only 15 percent of the nation's youth, they make up almost one third of the nation's foster care population. Black children are more likely than white children to be placed in foster care, take longer to be reunified with their parents, and are more likely to have the legal ties to their families permanently severed. One factor in this is the spatial concentration of child welfare agency involvement in segregated black neighborhoods in big cities around the country-what I call the system's "racial geography." Black children are at high risk of growing up in a neighborhood where child protective services are heavily involved and large numbers of children have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care. My research in a poor black Chicago neighborhood documents that intensive state supervision of families can have damaging community-wide effects on social relationships.

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### **New Trends in Who Is Adopting and Where They Are Adopting From**

Despite the attention given to adoptions from abroad, the overwhelming majority of adoptions today (nearly 70 percent) are of children from foster care. The rest are divided between adoptions of infants born in the U.S. and children of all ages from other countries. Most of the boys and girls being adopted (from anywhere) are older, of color, have special needs and/or are of a different race/ethnicity than their new parents. And, in a radical departure from the past, the parents are often single, cohabitating, gay or lesbian, older and/or of color.

A majority (55 percent) of infant adoptions in the U.S. are "open" - meaning there is ongoing contact between the children's adoptive families and families of origin - and just 5 percent are "closed." The rest are "mediated," which means the flow of information goes through adoption agencies or other professionals. And 95 percent of agencies now offer open adoptions.

About one-third of the adoptions by lesbians and gay men are "open," and the birth families' initial reactions regarding the sexual orientation of prospective adoptive parents are very positive (73%). Interestingly, male couples more often report having been chosen

because of their sexual orientation than do lesbians, with the birth-mothers expressing a desire to remain the child's "only mother."

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### **Who Is Getting Deported?**

Deportations from the United States are at a historic high. In 2011, the United States Department of Homeland Security deported nearly 400,000 people - twice as many as in the entire decade of the 1980s. Nevertheless, this rate of one thousand people a day is only enough to deport a fraction of undocumented and deportable migrants in the United States. Thus, immigration law enforcement must target its efforts. This has resulted in racially disparate deportations: 97 percent of all people deported are from Latin America and the Caribbean, even though 25 percent of undocumented migrants are not Latinos. Moreover, nearly all deportees are men. Our estimates show that about 80 percent of people deported from the United States are men, even though about half of all migrants are women. The disproportionate deportation of Latino male breadwinners severely impacts the well-being of Latino children.

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### **Racial Bias in Child Protection**

The over-representation of African American children in child welfare systems is well established. At each point along the child welfare pathway, from the decision of whether or not to accept a report for investigation, to the decision to confirm an allegation of maltreatment, to the decision to place a child in out-of-home care, African-American children are more likely than White children to be drawn into the child welfare system. Some researchers suggest this is simply because African American children are more likely to be poor, to live in single-parent households, or to have other factors that put them at higher risk of abuse or neglect. However, our study, using data from the Texas child welfare system, reveals that even after accounting for the influence of poverty and other risk factors, the race of the child remains an independent predictor of the decision to substantiate allegations of maltreatment. These results demonstrate that the race of the child does play a role in the decisions made by child protection agencies about whether abuse or neglect has occurred and suggests that racial bias remains an important factor in understanding the over-representation of African American children in this system.

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### **Support for Child Well-Being**

Despite all the election-year talk about the need to cut government spending, FEWER Americans want to do so today than in 1980, according to a March 2012 Harris Poll. In 1980, 23 percent wanted to cut Social Security payments, compared to just 12 percent today, and 65 percent wanted to cut spending on food stamps, compared to 43 percent today. Fewer than one in four Americans wants to cut federal aid to education or federal health care programs. However, almost 60 percent want to cut subsidies to business and 74 percent want to cut foreign military aid.

Stephanie Coontz, Professor of History and Family Studies, The Evergreen State College, Director of Research and Public Education, Council on Contemporary Families, 360 556-9223; 360 352-8117; coontzs@msn.com

### **A Cycle of Unwed Motherhood or a Cycle of Poverty?**

Many children of single mothers are poor. And many poor children grow up to be poor adults. So it seems reasonable to conclude that single motherhood is a crucial part of the cycle of poverty that must be broken before we can improve well-being and mobility for all children. However, research undermines this conclusion in two ways. First, careful studies that track children over time have shown that it is poverty itself - not growing up with a single mother - that is the biggest contributor to poverty in adulthood. Many single-parent families are poor, but it is the poverty, not the family structure, that seems to undermine the children's upward mobility. Second, the United States, along with the United Kingdom, does a particularly poor job of addressing poverty for single-parent families.

In the U.S. we have the largest "poverty penalty" for single motherhood - that is, their poverty rates compared with the total poverty rate. If the relative poverty rates for single mothers were lower in the US, we might spend more time (and money) addressing poverty itself, and less trying to change the family structures of the poor.

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### **To Become a Parent or to Remain Child-free by Choice**

No programs currently exist to help couples make this decision. We are currently in the pilot study stage of researching a new program, Choosing the Parenting Lifestyle (CPL), a research-informed and therapeutic model designed to: 1) assist couples with making the decision to become parents or not; 2) address timing of entering parenthood; 3) help couples prepare well for the transition to parenthood should they choose to become parents; 4) provide couples who choose to remain child-free with encouragement and support for following through on their decision. The fundamental goal of CPL is to help couples to *realistically assess their motivations* for deciding whether or not to have children and to weigh the personal, emotional, relational, and financial costs associated with their choice. In addition to seeking to reduce the overall incidence of child maltreatment by helping couples think through this important decision prior to entering parenthood, CPL seeks to improve the quality of life for both childbearing couples and childfree couples by giving them permission to explore goodness of fit and congruence of parenting with their personalities and their lifestyle. Fittingly, the point of intervention is preventative rather than reactive in that it seeks to help couples think through this important decision, and/or prepare for the transition to parenthood, prior to becoming parents.

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### **How Do Women and Men Differ in Their Use of Living Space, Post-Divorce?**

Although gendered differences in the way men and women parent tend to lessen after divorced parents establish separate residences, significant differences remain in the way that men and women establish and utilize space in their new homes when their children are with them. Our qualitative interviews with young adults reveal that, regardless of custodial arrangements, mothers are more likely than fathers to preserve private spaces for children, and to respect those spaces as sacred. For example, mothers are much less inclined to change the function of a child's room than fathers are after a divorce, regardless of whether children spend equal time with both parents or more time with the mothers. Fathers, by contrast, often adapt the rooms used by their children to more functional purposes, rather than preserve them as the children's private space. In many fathers' homes after a divorce, the children's rooms became a space also used for guests, storage, or exercise.

All but a few of the participants in our interviews additionally reported that their mothers spent more time in their private bedroom spaces with them than their fathers did. This may be why children tend to perceive the post-divorce role of mothers as more nurturing and more devoted to the preservation of children's privacy. Fathers seeking such closeness might consider these perceptions when they arrange their household space following divorce.

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### **The Not-Much-Opportunity Society**

Per-child spending on early childhood education has declined in the past two years, and the phase-out of the American Recovery and Investment Act will almost certainly lead to further cuts, something that bodes ill for the future of an equal opportunity society. If federal spending on education and other programs for children continues to decline, as projected in a recent Urban Institute report, children's outcomes will increasingly depend on whether their parents have the resources to pay privately for enrichment programs. A new book edited by economists Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane, *Whither Opportunity*, documents already-growing disparities in educational outcomes between children in poor and rich families, finding that educational mobility has declined over time. Alan Krueger, Chair of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisors, recently summarized international evidence that inequality among adults reduces economic mobility among children. As he puts it, "the fortunes of one's parents seem to matter increasingly in American society."

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### **Are Relationships Moving Faster Today Than They Did in the Past?**

According to conventional wisdom, dating couples in the 21st century initiate sex much more rapidly than in the past. In my research utilizing the Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS), gathered in 2005-2006, I found that nearly a third of married and cohabiting mothers became sexually involved with their current partners within the first month. In another recent study, Busby, Carroll, and Willoughby reported that nearly forty percent of their married sample became sexually intimate with their future spouses within the first

month of dating. And data on young adults from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reveal that nearly one half of men and a third of the women reported becoming sexually involved with their most recent partner within the first month (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011; Sassler & Joyner, 2011).

These data tell a consistent story: Couples rapidly become sexually involved, often within the first month. But this appears to be a consistent pattern reaching back at least four decades, not something new and notable. While we have few nationally-representative data sets from the 1970s and 1980s, studies of college students from several decades ago suggest that their relationships progressed just as quickly then. In a 1970s study of college students, Peplau, Rubin, & Hill found that 41 percent had engaged in sexual intercourse within a month after they first began dating. Cohen and Shotland, in another study of college undergraduates in the first half of the 1990s, reported that the men expected on average to become sexually intimate within a month of dating; their actual experiences were largely consistent with expectations.

It seems that today's couples differ from those in the past not in how long they wait to become sexually intimate, but in the time they take to marry. While premarital sexual activity has been normative for the past few decades, the increasing age at first marriage means that the period between initiating sexual involvement and getting married has become considerably longer. And rather than waiting to set up a household, more couples now live together (cohabit) before marriage.

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### **Stayover Relationships: An Alternative to Cohabitation**

Most Americans engage in romantic relationships beginning in their teens and many wait until their late twenties or early thirties to marry. In between, teenagers and emerging adults engage in a variety of relationships that vary in their levels of intimacy and commitment. Most studies of non-marital relationships have focused either on casual hookups or on couples who cohabit. We are studying a group of emerging adults who are engaged in stayover relationships. Stayover couples spend the night together out of comfort and convenience, yet maintain separate homes in order to control the pace of the relationship and avoid the practical entanglements of cohabitation (e.g., sharing a lease). Some authors worry that people who engage in hookups may be undermining their ability to sustain a long-term relationship. But cohabitation can have the opposite momentum, encouraging a couple to slide into marriage without sufficient planning and thus raising their risk of divorce. We suggest that staying over may be a less risky alternative to cohabitation for couples who want to engage in monogamous relationships but are not ready to make a formal commitment.

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### **Fathers Matter for Children -- for Better and for Worse**

When fathers are positively involved with their children's care and rearing, children do better academically and get along better with peers, adolescents take fewer risks and get

into trouble less, and young adults establish more positive relationships in the families they create. These benefits are multiplied when fathers improve their relationships with their partner as well as with their children.

In a large intervention study with more than 900 low-income California families, developed by Carolyn and Phil Cowan and Marsha and Kyle Pruett, parents were randomly assigned to (1) the usual services for low-income families, (2) ongoing groups for couples, or (3) ongoing groups for fathers. Fathers who participated in either of the ongoing groups led by experienced leaders became more involved in their children's lives and engaged in less harsh parenting. And children of parents assigned to both ongoing groups showed fewer behavior problems than those whose parents did not take part in the ongoing groups. But parents assigned to the groups for couples showed additional positive benefits: their parenting stress declined and they argued less about disciplining their children.

Not surprisingly, children and adolescents tend to have more academic, social, and emotional problems when their fathers are distant, neglectful, or abusive, while children fare better with fathers who are warm, responsive, and set reasonable limits. This study and many others show that what fosters children's well-being is not simply having a father who spends lots of time with them. The quality of the dad's relationship with the child - and with the mother - makes a significant difference. This is why groups in which both parents participate are an especially effective way to promote fathers' family involvement.

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### **Communication Technologies: Help, Hindrance, or Neither for Divorced Parents?**

Although considerable research has been focused on divorced coparents, little is known about their use of new technology (e.g., texting, emails, twitter) to communicate. One assumption is that reducing face-to-face interactions between divorced parents could reduce hostility and angry encounters, and thus may benefit children. In an in-depth study of 49 divorced coparents, however, we found that the relationship between the parents, not the technology per se, was what counted. Cooperative coparents used email, texting, and tools like Google Calendar to make communication across households easier and to ensure both parents knew what was happening in their children's lives. Coparents with difficult relationships, however, used these same technologies strategically as tools for controlling interactions with the other parent in attempts to withhold information, to reduce the other parent's involvement into childrearing decisions, and to reduce conflicts. Communication technologies do not change coparental relationships for better or worse; they become extensions of the existing relationships

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### **Do Grandparents Have a Right to See Their Grandchildren?**

With the exception of the District of Columbia, all fifty states have enacted statutes giving grandparents visitation rights. These statutes are due largely to the well-organized efforts of grandparents and their supporters who have joined to ensure that the law preserves access between grandparents and grandchildren.

However, despite these laws, most grandparents, depending on their place of residence, find that they have little real legal recourse in the event of an estrangement from an adult child, or when their child divorces and is denied custody. In *Troxel v. Granville*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that parents should be the primary determinants in who gains access to a grandchild. In some states, one of the parents must be deceased before a court will even consider awarding visitation to a grandparent. In the UK, the situation is a little more hopeful. Recent laws require that separating parents make provisions to ensure that grandparents continue to have a role in the lives of their children after they split up. Joshua Coleman, Ph.D. Co-Chair, Council on Contemporary Families; 510-547-6500; josh@drjoshuacoleman.com

### **A Rise in Childlessness among Educated Women**

A sizable proportion of highly educated women in recent cohorts have remained childless. Among American women today aged forty to forty-four, 20 percent have never had a child, double the share thirty years ago. The share rises to 27 percent for those with graduate or professional degrees. Highly educated women also tend to have fewer children than they say they wanted earlier in their lives. Many occupations, especially those that are the most highly paid, require almost total absorption in the job, which is problematic for workers who want to spend time with children and other family members.

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### **What Helps Low-Income Fathers Become Better Fathers?**

Nearly 14 million children in the United States live below the poverty level, and 41 percent of children live in families that qualify as low-income, living at or below 200 percent of the poverty level (NCCP). More than one fourth of those children live in low-income families with married parents. Poverty has especially deleterious effects on children and has been associated with poorer health, academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. One mechanism by which financial strain impacts children is through family processes such as marital and parent-child relationship quality, with parents' psychological distress implicated in poor relationship quality and parenting behavior. Our study found that compared to non-attenders, fathers who attend workshops where communication, coping, problem solving, and parenting skills are taught increase their level of involvement with children, and that positive change in father involvement is linked to improved parental alliance.

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### **Is the "Hurried Child" Always a Bad Thing?**

In affluent countries, processes that impel children to take on adult-like responsibilities and roles in the family are considered damaging to a youth's psychosocial development. However, our study found that for adolescents raised in adverse circumstances, playing an

important role in the family is associated with increased feelings of self-esteem, resilience, and efficacy. For these young people, contributing to the family may allow them to secure the resources they need to feel good about themselves and to ensure their own material and emotional well-being by adding to the overall success of their families. It may also grant them a kind of status in the family they might not otherwise have.

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### **Health of Immigrant Children Worsens with Length of Time in US**

Despite poorer socioeconomic circumstances in their country of origin and the stress associated with migration and acculturation, foreign-born children who immigrate to the United States typically have lower mortality and morbidity risks than U.S. children born to immigrant parents. Over time however, and across generations, the health advantage of immigrant children fades. For example, researchers have found that the share of adolescents who are overweight or obese, a key indicator of physical health, is lowest for foreign-born youth, but these shares grow larger for each generation and increase rapidly as youths transition into adulthood.

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### **Being Quiet: A Virtue or a Problem for Chinese Immigrant Children in the US?**

Expectations for verbal expression and silence greatly differ across societies. In Asia, including Japan, being modest and not asserting one's desires or self tend to be considered positive attributes. Adults view quiet children as being sensitive to others and tend to encourage children's attentive listening. In the U.S., by contrast, being expressive and asserting one's desires and needs are viewed positively. Quietness may be viewed as a lack of interest or intellectual and social competence. Thus, Asian immigrant children are likely to face a difficult adjustment at the time of transition from home to school in Western countries.

We examined 166 4-year-olds, including low socioeconomic status (SES) Chinese immigrant, middle class Chinese immigrants, and European American children in the U.S. We collected surveys from teachers, and teachers evaluated children's verbal expressions, school adjustment, peer relations, and learning engagement. Chinese immigrant children, regardless of their SES, were significantly quieter and less expressive than European American children, according to the teacher evaluations. Moreover, in American preschools, quiet Chinese immigrant children were likely to have more school problems, were less engaged in learning, and have more negative peer relations. However, in Asian-dominant preschools, quiet children were likely to have less school problems and were more engaged in learning. This study highlights the importance of considering cultural contexts when evaluating children's performance and behaviors.

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### **Cultural Differences in Parents' Pre-school Preferences**

Little is known about the cultural differences in how parents' evaluate high-quality preschools. Particularly important is the understanding of immigrant parents' views about high-quality preschools in relation to their cultural and socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. Our study examined 225 parents' beliefs about features in a high-quality preschool among Chinese immigrant parents, both low-SES and middle class, and middle-class European American parents with 4-year-olds. Regardless of culture or SES, parents indexed the quality of teachers, curricula, and environment as critical components to be a high-quality preschool. However, Chinese immigrant parents' descriptions were focused on the quality of *teachers* compared to European American parents who stressed individual attention and response to the needs of parents and children. We found a larger difference between low-SES Chinese immigrant parents and European American parents. Our findings suggest that parents place varying priorities and values on features in a high-quality preschool depending on their cultural and SES backgrounds.

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### **Homeless Children**

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, about 1.6 million children were homeless annually in America between 2006 and 2010. Children without stable homes are more likely than others to repeat a school grade, be expelled or drop out of high school.

Homeless preschoolers are more likely to have a major developmental delay, and they exhibit higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behaviors than their peers.

To increase academic attainment and reduce problematic behaviors in homeless children, access to high-quality child care and early education is essential. But unlike public school programs for children in grades K-12, which are universally provided, the availability of preschool and child care programs varies greatly by locale. Indeed, 10 states have no established state preschool programs. In most states, public preschool programs are currently not funded at a level sufficient to educate the number of children eligible for such services. State-funded preschool programs currently serve just 24 percent of four-year-olds and 4 percent of three-year-olds. In six states, less than 15 percent of 4-year-old children are enrolled in any public preschool program, including Head Start.

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### **The Hidden Digital Live of Teens**

Recent studies from the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggest that the vast majority of teens have a cellphone and spend a lot of time on it. Older adolescent females lead the way with cell use, sending upwards of 3,000 texts per month. While parents have general ideas about the pervasiveness of digital media use, they often don't know the specifics and real frequency of that use, which includes (increasingly) live streaming of movies and television on cellphones, sexting (sending or receiving sexually-charged material via phone), gaming, and social aggression via text and use of social media on phones, tablets and laptops. When parents do discover the extent of their children's involvement in digital media, it is often a source of family conflict. My clinical practice has

seen a significant uptick in parents and teens of all ages having conflict around discovering the details of hidden digital lives.

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### **Have We Really Been Over-Diagnosing and Over-Treating AD/HD?**

Most surveys of parents, educators and pediatricians indicate a belief that Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is being over-diagnosed and over-medicated. By 2011, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) noted that nearly 1 in 10 children had received an AD/HD diagnosis. Despite the increased media attention and significant rise in diagnosis and pharmacological and behavior treatments, my clinical practice consistently sees a failure by school personnel, parents, pediatricians and even many clinicians in the mental health field-especially those working with adolescents-to understand the criteria for making accurate diagnoses of AD/HD-PI (predominantly Inattentive Type) and AD/HD-Combined Type. In general, teachers, parents, doctors and mental health clinicians think of AD/HD as related to *hyperactivity* and automatically assume that the treatment for the disorder involves stimulant medication. Basic misinformation about AD/HD subtypes, prejudice and lack of knowledge about the range of treatment options and ongoing mistakes in diagnosis constitute significant barriers for treatment and understanding of teens suffering with AD/HD-PI and Combined Type. All these contribute to ongoing learning, social and familial difficulties for teens.

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### **Health Risks for Boys Greater Than for Girls**

Research consistently shows that parents and other adults believe that boys, even as infants, are less vulnerable and less fragile than girls. The media reinforce this message by portraying boys as more immune to risks, while portraying girls as being more vulnerable to them.

What is the effect of these misperceptions? One consequence is that parents are much less concerned about the safety of their sons than their daughters and are more likely to encourage risky activities in sons. Boys believe that they're less vulnerable and thus engage in riskier driving habits and sexual practices, poorer eating habits and are less likely to use sun protection - all of which increase their health risks. Each day, 3 times more boys than girls under the age of 18 die. Boys account for most injuries among kids, and up to 3 times more boys than girls have a cluster of risk factors linked to heart disease.

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### **Excess Weight and Distorted Body Image: A Female Problem?**

Although obesity is now considered an epidemic in the United States, it's news to most people that far more men and boys than girls and women are overweight or obese. New research shows that parents often don't recognize when their sons - but not their daughters - are overweight. Boys themselves often don't realize when they're overweight. While girls think they're fatter than they are, boys tend to think they're skinnier than they are.

Research shows that one- to two-thirds of normal-weight adolescent boys want to gain weight - and eat high-fat diets in order to do so. In particular, boys who have more traditional ideas about manhood want to be bigger and more muscular. Boys who want to

be bigger are more likely than other boys to have poor self-esteem and to be depressed. It's important that we recognize that girls and women aren't the only ones who may be worrying too much about their weight.

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### **Parental Estrangement: The Son-in-law/Daughter-in-law Connection**

While most people believe that parental estrangement only occurs as a result of child abuse or neglect, many adult children estrange themselves later in life in response to events that surround their getting married or becoming new parents.

This is often in response to a parent being overly opinionated about a romantic partner and thus creating a loyalty bind between their attachment to the partner and their attachment to the parent. Parents may also create a bind for the adult child by criticizing the parenting of the daughter-in-law or son-in-law. This is problematic, not only because of the loyalty conflicts it creates in the adult child, but because it challenges the young adult's desire to feel independent of the parents' opinions.

On the other hand, a son-in-law or daughter-in-law can be a primary cause of an estrangement even when the parents aren't critical. Some spouses feel threatened by their partner's attachment to his or her parents. They perceive that closeness as a threat to the marriage or project onto his or her parents all of their own unresolved feelings of disappointment, anger, or loss from their own childhoods.

When a young couple has children, these feelings may become even more intense and unresolvable and can result in the adult child being presented with a "them or me" ultimatum from the spouse. If the adult child marries someone far stronger, or far more troubled, they may find themselves unable to step outside of the ultimatum and negotiate a more reasonable position that allows closeness to both the spouse and parents.

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### **Is My Child Autistic, Gifted or Quirky?**

One in 88 children is diagnosed with autism every year. This is nearly twice as often as it was diagnosed just five years ago. As a result of increased public awareness, many parents are eager to determine whether their child's unusual behavior is something to worry about. Making such a diagnosis can be tricky for parents and even some professionals, since gifted children are sometimes far more idiosyncratic in their behavior and may engage in activities far different from their peers. And some children are neither gifted nor autistic, simply different.

Unfortunately, doctors or others unfamiliar with diagnosing autism may dismiss parent concerns, which results in delaying diagnosis and the opportunity for early intervention.

The Modified Checklist of Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT) provides a list of informative questions about a child's behavior and can indicate whether further evaluation by a developmental pediatrician, neurologist, psychiatrist or psychologist is warranted.

Evaluations often include hearing and lead exposure tests as well. Some screening tools are geared to older children and/or specific autism spectrum disorders. In general, parents are better off trusting their concerns and getting an evaluation if they have any doubts about their child's behavior.

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## About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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