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THE AMERICAN FAMILY --- MAKING IT WORK

By Dr. Amitai Etzioni

THE long decline of the American family seems to have stopped and reconstruction begun.

The U.S. Census Bureau cautiously stated recently that "marital stability in the future may be greater than in the past." After a rapid divorce increase in the late '60s and early '70s that saw the number of divorces triple between 1962 and 1981, the rate dipped in 1980, rose to its previous level in 1981, but fell again in 1982. Some believe the slowdown is because of the recession, which makes divorce more difficult.

However, there are other reasons.

The glorification of being single has lost much of its glow. Several months ago, a television network ran a special titled "Second Thoughts on Being Single." It featured many singles, especially women, who expressed a yearning for the warmth and stability of family life and commitment to children. Also, once-popular books such as "How to Be Your Own Best Friend" and "Looking Out for No. 1" no longer sell as well as they did. The new rage is "Couples," a social science study highlighting the virtues of families.

And not a moment too soon. For two decades the American family was in a sharp decline. In 1960 there were roughly five married couples for every single household head, but by 1979 the ratio declined to 2.4. If the American family had continued its accelerating decline, not a single family unit would have been left by the year 2007.

Family decline was caused by

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For nearly two decades being single was the "in" thing, and it nearly destroyed the American family. Now that is all changing.

ideological attack and the loss of family missions. Under the ideological attack, the American family, already stripped of most non-essential duties, faced an attack on its remaining bastions. Sex was available premaritally and extramaritally. Morton Hunt reported that for the generation of young Americans 18 to 25 in the '70s, premarital sex ran as high as 81 percent for females and 95 percent for males. Extramarital sex was reported



by about half the men and 20 percent of the women.

In the lack of missions arena, education had long ago been taken from the family and invested in schools. While in the old days the members of one family often worked one farm, very few families today are also a work unit. The rapid rise in women who work outside the home or receive welfare assistance broke economic dependence as a source of family bond.

Thus occurred an expanding loss of missions from the family to other institutions. In the '60s and '70s, even the upbringing of young children, once considered by social scientists as *the* family duty, was downgraded by an increase in the number of persons who decided not to have children at all, and those who decided they did not need a family to bring up infants. They either delegated this duty to child-care centers or tried to do the job on their own. By 1980, nine million children under age 18 were being raised by one parent, mostly by women.

These trends were helped by a slew of arguments that encouraged and justified divorce developments. These arguments characterized family de-

cline as progress and provided people with additional incentive to seek divorce instead of trying to weather the difficult times every marriage knows.

The anti-family arguments, which were promoted in the '60s and '70s, deserve a brief review because, while their appeal has declined in the last year, they have not disappeared.

One argument stripped the stigma from divorce and sought to make it an acceptable lifestyle. This was achieved in part by introducing no-fault divorce in most states. Theoretically, this meant that no party to a divorce had to be declared the guilty one. The very name of the new approach implied that divorce was not a faulty behavior, and

Despite the enormous variety of societies, from Azande to the Zulus, there never has been in all of human history a society without a nuclear family. And while a family can do without home-cooked meals and do the laundry in a laundromat and so on, rearing young children cannot be delegated to institutions, baby sitters, cleaning women, grannies or friends.

The psychic damage divorce causes, especially to children, may not be obvious. Indeed, I never encountered in any professional or personal experience a child who had not suffered.

For awhile, social scientists were unable to measure these difficulties; some even doubted that they existed.

A 'no-fault' divorce meant no one was guilty and it made getting a divorce much easier. And evidence clearly showed that more second marriages ended in divorce than first ones.

divorce procedures were made much easier. The anti-family ideologues went a step further: They stopped using the label "second marriage," which has a negative ring to it, and introduced such positive sounding labels as "blended" or "reconstituted" family.

In an often-quoted article, "Second-Time Winners," Princeton demographer Aldridge Westoff argued that the first marriage is a dry run; the second time around is better. Others called for contractual marriages, limited to a given number of years, with the rights and duties of the sides spelled out in advance. Still others suggested that grannies, friends or neighbors could substitute for fathers; single mothers could effectively serve as parents. The idea of "quality time" was introduced, where persons could spend small amounts of time between work and a date with their children but "make those times count." The latest twist is what might be called "quality phone calls," in which single parents could have a "good talk" with their children on the phone.

By now the appeal of these arguments and others like them has diminished, although in some parts of the country it is premature to say that they are worn out. It has become clear that the family is an essential building stone of every society.

However, in recent years scientific evidence on psychic damages has been accumulating. One study shows that even 10 years after divorce, children still have a worse relationship with both their parents than those in which the family stayed intact. Children from divorced families felt more distant, felt less affection and reported poorer communication. Anger is often reported among such children. A higher rate of drug abuse, juvenile delinquency and poor academic performance has also been found, though those are due, in part, to the average lower income of broken families.

The fact is that bringing up children is an important task. It cannot be effectively discharged by a single person who works a whole day and comes home physically and psychologically exhausted, and then must attend to household duties. Even two working parents have a difficult time providing the time and psychic energy required.

If both parents continue to work outside the household in the future, as many do now, at least various accommodations will have to be worked out to make more room for attending to the children. Flex-time, in which parents work at different schedules, helps (although in many work places this is not a practical solution). If mothers will take a break in their careers for child-rearing years, or at least long maternity leaves, this will help.

Greater willingness of fathers to contribute to household chores also has merit. Schools may start at age

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FAMILY TOGETHERNESS—*Marriages are up, divorces are down, and the nuclear family that almost went out of existence is experiencing a solid, healthy resurgence.*

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four; the hours of kindergartens lengthened. Other accommodations may have to be worked out. But it is becoming increasingly clear to millions of parents that while both parents may need or want to work outside the home, if both seek careers, with the full-time and emotional commitments this requires, the children will suffer. In recent years, more and more parents chose not to make the children pay the price. Often women continue to work outside the home, but only on a part-time basis, or at a job that does not command the same dedication as a career. They are much more likely to make babysitting arrangements or order groceries from their secretarial desk than to take work home.

As to second marriages somehow being better, the evidence clearly shows otherwise: More second marriages end in divorce than first ones. Sooner or later people learn to recognize that life requires people making accommodations to one another; that to gain the warmth and

stability of lasting relations one must seek to work out matters with one's partner, rather than forever looking for a greener pasture; that being single is often being lonely and depressed; that children can be a source of deep satisfaction, but only if they are properly brought up, and that cannot be achieved in limited doses of "quality time." It requires dedication.

According to data published by pollster Daniel Yankelowitz and collected by the University of Michigan, during the '70s most Americans felt guilty about not doing enough for themselves. There was a growing feeling of "I go through this world but once; let's eat and be merry today because tomorrow . . ." However, by the early '80s, many of the weary travelers of the free-for-all world began returning, disillusioned. Today, more and more people have discovered that deep satisfaction and true happiness are not found in bedding one more person, or through increased sexual acrobatics, or by being on their own.

Rather, they have rediscovered the old joys of sharing and caring, of togetherness, of family. Not everybody has made this transition yet, although it seems to be a rising trend. The family is gaining; anti-family arguments are losing; marriage is "in," and being single or "re-singled" is less glorified.

This reconstruction is part of a more encompassing age of rebuilding. Schools are on the mend. SAT scores ceased to decline and in many areas are on the rise. Minimum competence is widely required. Colleges raised standards, reduced electives and returned to a required core curriculum. There is a religious revival in all branches of American religion. Patriotism is again popular.

In the renewed American family women will continue to enjoy more rights than they had in the past. Many may continue to work outside the household, although staying home is likely to regain in stature. And many women will work only part time, or intermittently, or not take their careers seriously. Other compromises between the old and new are yet difficult to foresee, after all, reconstruction just began. But one thing seems clear: The age of dismantling and attacking the family has reached its end. □