

The Way I See It

CLARK SWAIN

EDUCATION FOR MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD IS BASIC

I once counseled a couple who had had a miserable marriage for years, mainly because of what they didn't know. Counseling gave them information and new ideas which they applied successfully to their relationship. During my last session with them, the husband observed, "Our schools teach us how to be mathematicians, nurses, engineers, and secretaries, but they don't teach us how to be husbands and wives."

With over 90 percent of our citizens marrying and becoming parents, what could be more basic than education for marriage and parenthood? Driver education is offered to decrease automobile wrecks, but thousands of marriages are wrecked every year. Of the couples who stay married, approximately a third say they are dissatisfied. Child abuse and neglect are widespread; even kind parents are frustrated because they don't know how to be effective parents. Expanded education for marriage and parenthood could prevent much waste and suffering.

I propose a nationwide program in marriage and family life education through our high schools, colleges, and universities. These classes should either be required or taught in such an interesting way that the majority of students would choose to take them.

The public will support such a program. According to a Gallup poll taken last spring, 86 percent of Americans favor public schools teaching children how to become good par-

ents; 87 percent also feel schools should include marriage and family living classes.¹

Responses from students who have taken such courses affirm their value. A college senior wrote, "I have never been able to take a course as interesting and beneficial." Two high school seniors wrote, "We feel privileged to have a class titled Adult Living, which not only deals with sex, but also love, marriage, self-image, and responsibility." When I asked one of my own students if these classes should be offered at the high school level, she replied, "Yes, definitely. A lot of my close friends never made it to college. They're married now and some of their marriages aren't working out." Finally, a graduate student who attended a summer workshop on marriage and parenthood told me, "I can't wait to get home and start to rebuild my marriage. At last I've been given some tangible ways to deal with our problems."

Marriage and family therapists, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists try to help individuals and families remedy problems that never would have developed had there been the preventive power of education for marriage and parenthood.

Favoring prevention rather than remedy, Clark Vincent, marriage consultant at the Bowman Gray School of Medicine, says, "The billions of dollars spent annually by the federal government to support programs of training, research, treatment, and service in a wide variety of social problems (for example, drug addiction, alcoholism, delinquency, mental illness, and suicide) usually bypass marriage and the family, the unit

within which many of these problems have their origin. If even 10 percent of such spending were invested in counseling, research, training (teaching), and treatment for marital health, it might well be possible to reduce by half the expenditures for social problems."²

New marriage and parenthood classes usually attract female students. Males may be reluctant at first, but they will enroll if they know they're welcome. Teachers can ask their first group of students to advertise the class by telling their friends—male and female—about it. In Meridian, Idaho, the yearly enrollment in the high school marriage class increased in three years from 30 girls to nearly 300 boys and girls. Of the total enrollment, from one-third to one-half are now males. In order to appeal more to boys, the title of the class was changed from Family Living to Adult Living. At Montana State University men constituted almost half of the 16,000 students enrolled in my Marriage and Family Life classes from 1964 to 1976.

Students in these classes acquire knowledge and perspective that can strengthen their ability to succeed as marriage partners and parents. We are more likely to succeed at any endeavor—whether engineering, nursing, or family living—if we are educated to do what we intend to do. If we fail to prepare, then we've prepared to fail. ■

¹ "Public Schools Should Teach Marriage, Family, Gallup Poll Says," *Education Daily* (4 June 1980): 4.

² Clark Vincent, *Sexual and Marital Health: The Physician as a Consultant* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

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