

Implications of Family Trends for Children: A Research Perspective

With dramatic changes in makeup of the American family, children confront new risks in growing up and schools face new challenges in guiding them.



The Issue at Hand: The Family

Alex Molnar

Adolescent drug use and teenage pregnancy are issues of national concern. Family policy is in a state of turmoil. The time is right for teachers, administrators, and school policymakers to review available information about the American family and to discuss its implications for our profession.

Although social science statistics regularly cross our desks, they tend to have a "the other guy" quality about them. I certainly don't like to think of myself as a statistical artifact. Yet, as I read through "Implications of Family Trends for Children: A Research Perspective" by Sandra L. Hofferth and "The Welfare of Families" by Mark Stern (scheduled for the March issue of *Educational Leadership*), I realize how well some of the statistics on the American family describe my own life. For half of my childhood, I was a member of a single-parent family headed by a female; I was married and a father at 18; I am divorced and remarried, and my wife and I have been custodial parents of up to five children at various times. A family like ours can pose some complicated problems for schools not equipped to respond to the vagaries inherent in working with children and their families in the late 1980s.

The destruction of the "Leave It to Beaver" model of the nuclear family means that family responsibilities are being distributed in new ways, are being taken over by nonfamily institutions, or are being abandoned. As family responsibilities shift, it is hardly surprising that the school, as the primary public institution devoted to the socialization and education of children, becomes a center of conflict.

One need only compare Phyllis Schlafly's introductory arguments in *Child Abuse in the Classroom* with the guidelines for curriculum instruction in almost any standard textbook on the middle school to grasp the dimensions of this conflict. The textbooks and *Child Abuse in the Classroom* illustrate profoundly different visions of children and of society. The textbooks and Schlafly all acknowledge the same problems: teen suicide, adolescent pregnancy, and young people's rejection of social norms, to name a few. The textbook authors propose school programs designed to respond to the predictable crises that adolescence visits on the young in our culture. Schlafly, on the other hand, argues that such school programs play a large role in causing the problems that afflict our young. In other words, according to Schlafly, teenagers are getting pregnant because of sex education, killing themselves because they've been taught about nuclear war, and rejecting traditional values because they have thought about their values and discussed them in school. Schlafly would have parents reclaim the responsibility she believes schools inappropriately have assumed.

Clearly educators should not design programs based on stereotypes, ideology, or habit. We need to understand the conditions affecting children and their families. The two articles in this Contemporary Issues feature should help us to do that.

—Alex Molnar is Professor of Education, The University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. He is consultant to *Educational Leadership* for Contemporary Issues.

Schools today face the burden of educating students with many potential problems. The risks that children face in growing up have particular meaning for professional educators because they manifest themselves in children's social and academic behavior in the school setting, and because, with more mothers employed outside the home, teachers and schools have become increasingly important sources of stability in children's lives.

Poor grades, low motivation, and low long-term goals are risk factors for other problems in the teenage years, such as early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, girls who become pregnant often have had substantial school problems before the pregnancy. Having a child is another burden that is likely to remove the girl completely from the school system—but it may be the last blow, not the first. The most important predictor of how well her child will do in school is her own educational level. Thus are the failures of the mother passed on to her children—and to society.

Research can help educators define important family issues. In this article I present the results of demographic research, much of it funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Then I link these trends in the family to the consequent risks children face.

Marriage and Divorce

There are three dominant trends to remember. First, twice as many marriages—almost half—end in divorce today as did two decades ago. Second, young women are postponing marriage. The mean age for marriage for white women rose from 21 years during the 1950s to 23 between 1975–80. Among black women the mean age rose from 21 to 26 years in the same period. Since women's likelihood of marrying declines as they age, fewer women than ever before will get married. Third, divorce does not necessarily imply disillusionment with marriage. In fact, from 30 to 40 percent of marriages are actually remarriages (Espenshade 1983).

The increase in parental divorce and separation has had a major impact on children's lives. Over the past two decades the proportion of children living with two parents has fallen dramatically, while the proportion living with only their mother has more than doubled. In 1984, 15 percent of white children and 50 percent of black children under age 18 lived with their mother only, compared with 8 and 29 percent respectively in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985b). In 1984, 24 percent of Hispanic children lived with only their mother. If current trends continue, between 42 and 70 percent of white children and 86 to 94 percent of black children born around

1980 will spend some time in a one-parent family before reaching age 18 (Bumpass 1984, Hofferth 1985). Such children often have little contact with their absent parents (Furstenberg et al. 1983).

In addition, the proportion of children born out of wedlock has sharply increased. In 1984, 13 percent of white children and 59 percent of black children were born to unmarried mothers, compared with 6 percent and 38 percent respectively in 1970 (NCHS 1985). Of all children living with their mother only, 24 percent were living with a never-married mother, compared with 7 percent in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985b).

Many parents who divorce will remarry—about two-fifths within five years (Bumpass 1985). While remarriage is likely to improve the financial situation of the custodial parent, it also increases the complexity of family life. One study found that a majority of remarried couples in which the husband was under 30 reported that children from a prior marriage were present, although few had children from both marriages (Cherlin and McCarthy 1983). In 1980 one-sixth of all children under 18 were living in households of remarried parents. In addition, about half of children under age 5 and one-sixth of children aged 10–13 at their parents' remarriage will gain a half sibling from this new marriage (Bumpass 1985). Finally, about two-fifths of white children and three-fifths of black children will experience the dissolution of a parent's remarriage.

Women's Employment Outside the Home

The big story over the past 15 years is the substantial increase in the labor force participation of women with children under age 18. In 1985 half of all women with children under age three were in the work force, up from one-third in 1975, a 47 percent increase in just ten years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1985). As a result of this increase, the number of children with employed mothers continues to climb. The proportion of children under age six with employed mothers, presently half, is expected to reach two-thirds by 1995, and the proportion of school-age children with employed mothers, presently three-fifths, may rise to three-fourths over the next ten years (Hofferth and Phillips 1986).

The big shift in care for children is away from care provided by a relative in the home to care outside the home given by a nonrelative. In addition, over the past two decades there has also been a substantial increase in care for preschool children in child care centers—a doubling since the early 1970s (Hofferth and Phillips 1986, O'Connell and Rogers 1983, Lueck et al. 1982). A major concern has been whether mothers are able to find adequate care for their children. Although we occasionally hear horror stories about very young children caring for themselves before or after school when their parents work, such stories



are unusual. Fewer than 1 percent of five-year-olds care for themselves while their mothers work. In contrast, the majority of 12-year-olds spend time alone after school (U.S. Bureau of Census, in press).

Under what circumstances are children able to care for themselves? Under what conditions are they at high risk of succumbing to peer group pressure to engage in illegal or inappropriate activities such as drug use or early sexual exploration? Under what circumstances are they at risk of suffering from excessive fears and loneliness? These are important questions that need consideration. Although Steinberg (1986) suggests that supervi-

sion by an absent parent by phone may be sufficient to avoid serious problems, the need for research in this area is great.

Sex, Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy, and Childbearing

American teenagers face a tough time today. On the one hand, the age at which young women mature sexually (i.e., are able to bear children) has declined since the turn of the century by about a year, from 13.5 to age 12.8 (MacMahon 1973). On the other hand, the average age at which they marry has risen to historical highs. This means an increased period of time in which young people are interested in

sex and capable of reproduction, but are neither married nor prepared for childbearing and childrearing. The proportion of sexually active teens has, in fact, increased 66 percent since the early 1970s.

This situation poses a major societal dilemma for which various solutions have been proposed. One approach is to encourage youth to postpone sexual intercourse till they are much older or until marriage. A completely different approach might be simply to accept teen pregnancy and childbearing. A third approach, which a number of European societies have taken, is to accept teen sexual activity provided that childbearing is avoided through contraception. Although they recognize that sex may not be healthy for very young teens, some societies condone it for older teens and provide education in sexuality and contraception to very young children in the schools. These societies have found that although levels of sexual activity may be high, pregnancy rates among teens and the resulting birth rates are very low (Jones et al. 1985). A causal connection between sex education and lower rates of pregnancy has been hypothesized but not adequately tested.

The United States has taken several approaches to the issue, perhaps reflecting our pluralistic tradition. Contraception is available through hospitals, clinics, and private physicians, and there is substantial scientific evidence that family planning programs reduce teen pregnancies (e.g., Forrest et al. 1981). More recently, formal programs have been established to encourage teens to delay engaging in sexual intercourse, but the success of these programs has yet to be evaluated through rigorous scientific testing. Although sex is widely depicted on every television screen across the U.S. every night of the week, neither contraception nor the consequences of its nonuse are similarly depicted. In addition, research shows that parents do not appear to be the major sex educators of their children, especially of male children. Because both parents and children find communication about sex and contraception to be difficult, many children learn about such matters from peers and other sources. Ambivalent attitudes toward

sexuality and contraception in the U.S. may contribute to the inability of sexually active American teenagers to use contraception consistently and well (Jones et al. 1985). Again, this is a hypothesis that needs rigorous testing.

In 1984 there were 499,647 births to young women under age 20. This represents a considerable decline in births to teens over the decade, from a high of 656,460 in 1970 (Baldwin 1986). The number of teens has been declining from its height in the late 1970s, so for that reason alone we would expect the number of births to continue to decrease. In addition, the birth rates for adolescents have been declining, as have the number at risk of pregnancy (due in part to a leveling off of sexual activity since 1979).

However, adolescent reproductive behavior is still a cause for concern

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Linking Schools to Family Research

Researchers want to know how divorce affects children and what interventions might prevent its potentially harmful effects. Where such knowledge available, educators might deal more effectively with children going through a parental divorce. They might adopt research-based procedures to help children cope with family change and prevent them from losing interest in school and eventually dropping out.

Other researchers are looking more closely at the effect of the racial composition of schools on early initiation of sexual activity. They have found, for example, that blacks in racially segregated schools initiate sex at an earlier age than those in integrated schools (Furstenberg et al. 1985). More research needs to be done to find out what characteristics of segregated schools lead to early sexual exploration.

Although a major way to study children is to go directly to the schools they attend, educators often are unwilling to use student and staff time for research and feel constrained by the sensitive nature of the topics. One researcher I know, for example, is evaluating some newly established in-school health clinics. Unfortunately, he has had trouble in some communities obtaining school consent to conduct research, even from schools in which there is no program, but which might serve as comparison schools. Educators have expressed their concern for maintaining the privacy of students and teachers. Confidentiality, however, is no less a concern for researchers. Moreover, because they study the behavior of groups or types of persons (e.g., students who are from Hispanic or black families compared to those from white families), identification of individual students or teachers is neither necessary nor desirable.

Many research projects can benefit schools by providing information that goes beyond the basic statistics generally kept by most school systems. However, even if a research program offers the school no immediate benefit, an appropriately conducted scientific project sponsored by a respected scientific institution, conducted under the canons of scientific rigor, and performed by a qualified investigator can and will contribute to our scientific knowledge. Thus, cooperation between researchers and schools can benefit professional educators as well as society.

—Sandra L. Hofferth



because (1) birth rates of adolescents under 18, especially very young adolescents, are still high; (2) a high proportion of births to adolescents occur outside of marriage—54 percent in 1983; and (3) for most young adolescents, pregnancies are unplanned and unwanted. As a result, teens who become pregnant today are more likely than teens ten years ago to have abortions or out-of-wedlock births. Although in the past an unplanned pregnancy may have led to a "shotgun" wedding, such hastily arranged marriages are infrequent today. Although not entirely accepted, out-of-wedlock births have become more frequent and less subject to societal approbation than in the past.

Poverty

Families headed by women are much more likely to be poor than are traditional families. In 1984, 54 percent of children under 18 living in families

with a female householder, no husband present, were below the poverty level, compared with 13 percent for all other types of families. Since 1969 the proportion of children in families below the poverty level has increased substantially, due in part to the increase in families with female householders, no husband present (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985c, p. 458).

Changing Family Size

There has been a substantial reduction in the number of children women bear. Each woman born after 1945 is expected to bear about two children by the time she completes childbearing (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984, 1985a). In contrast, each woman born between 1930 and 1939 bore about three children.

Consequences for Children of Divorce and Separation

A great deal of research has been directed toward understanding the impact of parental divorce and separation on children. Researchers have found that parental divorce reduces the child's school achievement, chances of high school graduation, and completed years of schooling, and increases the probability of early sex, childbearing, and marriage (Shinn 1978, McLanahan 1985 and 1986, Krein and Beller 1986, Hill et al. 1985, Greenberg and Wolf 1982). Boys seem to be affected more strongly than girls, and the effects last longer. There is evidence that some effects of parental divorce on children decline or disappear after a year or two (Hetherington et al. 1983). However, a growing body of research suggests substantial long-term effects of experiencing a divorce or separation on the child's later economic well-being (McLanahan 1985, 1986).

Consequences for Children of Maternal Employment

Maternal employment per se has neither positive nor negative effects on children (Hayes and Kamerman 1983). A useful research approach has been to explore the characteristics of the settings in which children are cared for during the day to distinguish aspects of the environment and care that are detrimental or that contribute to children's well-being (Clark-Stewart and Fein 1984, Phillips 1984).

Sources for Professional Educators

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Consequences for Children of Teen Childbearing

Research consistently shows that children born to teenage mothers are disadvantaged compared with children born to older mothers. Early research found some small effects of maternal age at first birth on the social and emotional development of their young children. More recent research shows that these small differences in achievement, IQ, and social and emotional development persist as children grow older and appear to intensify during the elementary school and teenage years.

Children of adolescent mothers also do poorly in school. They are more

likely to be behind the modal grade for a child of their age and to score lower on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Moore 1986, Furstenberg and Brooks-Gunn 1985). They also have more behavior problems, such as running away, fighting, stealing, smoking, or other problems resulting in a note, teacher conference, suspension, or expulsion. One of the most important factors to explain the difference in achievement between children of younger and older childbearers is the education of the mother herself. Younger childbearers complete less schooling than older childbearers, and this difference in schooling affects the scholastic performance of their children (Moore 1986).

Consequences for Children of Poverty

Poor children receive significantly less adequate medical care than other children, and more than half of black children in low-income families received no dental care in 1975-76. As a result, poor health is more common among low-income children, who are more likely to be black and in a one-parent family headed by the mother and to have a mother with a low level of education. One of the consequences is more time spent out of the classroom because of illness (Kovar 1982).

Consequences for Children of Small Families

Research consistently shows children in small families outperform those in larger families (Polit 1982). Children in small families receive both more physical resources and more parental attention than do children in large families. Thus we would expect that children should be markedly more advantaged today than they were in the past. Unfortunately, although this is so for a sizable (Uhlenberg and Eggebeen 1986) portion of our nation's children, other demographic changes have negatively affected a large proportion of children.

School Children of Families in Flux

I have pointed out examples of demographic research findings that could be useful to professional educators in their daily work. The findings show that increasing numbers of children are seriously at risk physically and emotionally, and parents are not available during the day and are exhausted at night. Many children leave school to go home to an empty house. Even when they are home, parents appear unable to inform their children adequately about sex and sexuality and to provide the values that will guide them away from too early sexual experimentation and its undesirable consequences. Complicated family arrangements make it difficult even to determine who is responsible for the children.

The other side of the story, though, is that smaller families with greater economic resources may offer children advantages they could not claim

if both parents were not working outside the home. So, too, are blended families—the product of parental divorce and remarriage—discovering new strengths and increased freedom from marital mismatches and unhappy family relationships. Children are likely to be much better off as a result. Under these circumstances, education may become easier, not harder. □

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Sandra L. Hofferth is Sociologist/Demographer, Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Landow Building, Room 7C25, Bethesda, MD 20892.

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