

Faith *in the* Family

# ADVOCATE

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“No one can deny that divorce, separation, birth outside marriage and one-parent families as well as cohabitation and extra-marital sexual intercourse have increased rapidly. Many applaud these freedoms. But what should be universally acknowledged is that the children of parents who do not follow the traditional norm (i.e. taking on personal, active and long-term responsibility for the social upbringing of the children they generate) are thereby disadvantaged in many major aspects of their chances of living a successful life.

*On the evidence available such children tend to die earlier, to have more illness, to do less well at school, to exist at a lower level of nutrition, comfort and conviviality, to suffer more unemployment, to be more prone to deviance and crime, and finally to repeat the cycle of unstable parenting from which they themselves have suffered... The evidence all points in the same direction, is formidable, and tallies with common sense.”*

*Professor A H Halsey, Professor of Social Policy at Nuffield College, Oxford<sup>1</sup>*

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## Always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth

Over the past twenty years social policy experts have learnt a great deal about the breakdown of the family. Most now accept the evidence that children from broken homes tend to do worse than children from intact stable families across a whole range of important outcomes. Social policy experts are at a loss to explain why there should be this link. Many cite parental conflict. Most blame socio-economic circumstances. Some, like Professor Halsey, emphatically assert that it is the loss of a parent from the family home which has the most impact on children.

Now some say divorce itself is not the issue. Rodgers and Pryor in their review of over 200 studies quote with approval one study which argues: “Speaking precisely, we are not generally interested in the effects of divorce itself on children”.<sup>2</sup>

Exactly. Having been cornered by study after study showing the damage to children researchers now suggest radically new research programmes to keep them in business. Having had the cherished “pain free” divorce theory disproved, a kind of deconstructionist approach to research is now suggested.

Social science research appears to be always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.

In reality we never needed any study to tell us that children need a mother and a father.

Whatever problems couples may have had in the past they generally did not solve them by getting a divorce.

Those who fondly think of 40 years ago when the divorce rate (and the crime rate) was a fraction of what it is now are accused of “harking back to a golden age”.

But stable married families are essential *for the future* of our society. We are all paying the price of Britain’s divorce culture. It is time for everyone to acknowledge that adult freedom has gone too far.

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Colin Hart  
Director, *The Christian Institute*

<sup>1</sup> Halsey A H in Dennis N & Erdos G *Families without Fatherhood*, IEA, 1993, page xii

<sup>2</sup> Rodgers B and Pryor J *Divorce and Separation : The Outcomes for Children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, page 51

## Dare to Discipline?

Alison Back looks at some recent studies into the effects of parental smacking on children.

In the UK, surveys find that 90% of parents have smacked their child.<sup>1</sup> It is no different in the USA. A study published in 1991 found that over 90% of American parents use physical punishment as an attempt to correct misbehaviour.<sup>2</sup> The majority of family physicians (GP's) and paediatricians in the US also support the use of corporal punishment.<sup>3</sup>

While parental smacking is the norm in most families, it is not very popular in some circles. Some of the conflict within the scientific community regarding this issue is due merely to the paucity of good research on the subject.

Many of the studies which have been carried out varied widely in their definitions of the terms used, or gave no definition whatsoever, leaving the reader to make up their own mind as to the intended meaning of the researcher.

For example, the definition of 'mild spanking' which is given in an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association describes it as the "striking of the child's buttocks or hand with an open hand, lightly, leaving no mark except transient redness".

Other studies merely define smacking as being "hit" or "struck", terms which are not explicit enough to exclude practices which might be considered abusive.

Also, there appears to be little consensus among academics as to what constitutes abuse. For progress to be made in the debate, agreement must be reached on these issues.



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review. Studies were classified as having one of three outcomes - beneficial, detrimental or neutral. A finding was counted as a beneficial outcome if nonabusive or customary physical punishment significantly predicted a desirable outcome in the child (e.g. improved obedience). If physical punishment significantly predicted a detrimental outcome, such as lower self-esteem or increased delinquency, the finding was counted as a detrimental outcome. Other studies were counted as having a neutral outcome.

Several clear patterns emerged from the review. Firstly, those studies with the most thorough methodology tended to find beneficial outcomes.

Secondly, different patterns in the findings corresponded to the age of the child when physically punished. 18 of the 35 studies reviewed investigated physical punishment prior to age 13. 44% of those were shown to have predominantly beneficial outcomes, 39% predominantly neutral outcomes and 17% predominantly detrimental outcomes.

### ■The Larzelere Review

Dr Larzelere's excellent review of peer-reviewed journal articles which investigated child "outcomes" (results) associated with nonabusive physical punishment (i.e. smacking) by parents was published in 1996.<sup>4</sup> 35 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the

Thirteen of the studies measured physical punishment before and *after* age 13. Only 8% of those had predominantly beneficial outcomes, 54% predominantly neutral outcomes and 38% predominantly detrimental outcomes.

# Children

Thirdly, studies which excluded abuse from their measures of physical punishment were more likely to have predominantly beneficial outcomes. Out of the 11 studies which excluded abuse, over half (55%) were found to have beneficial outcomes and only 9% had detrimental outcomes. The remaining 36% had neutral outcomes.

Furthermore, certain methodological characteristics tended to mark those studies which had beneficial outcomes. Those which controlled for parenting characteristics and for general differences between families

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The effects of physical punishment depend more on when and how it is implemented, its role in their parents' overall approach to discipline and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

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were more likely to have a beneficial outcome. Also, those which specified a 2-smack procedure to the buttocks invariably found beneficial outcomes.

The following characteristics of physical punishment were found to be associated with beneficial or neutral outcomes:

- used less than weekly (or, with teenagers, fewer than ten times annually);
- used at nonabusive levels of severity;
- used by parents who were not physically violent against family members;
- used without a potentially damaging instrument;
- used during ages 2-6 (and possibly between ages 7 and 12);
- used privately;
- used with reasoning;

- used with an intermediate level of child distress;
- used primarily as a back-up for less aversive discipline responses;
- parents were positively involved with their child;
- parents had child-oriented, rather than parent-oriented, motives for smacking;



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- parents co-operated with each other in discipline responsibilities;
- parents followed through with their warnings; and
- parents did not use verbal put-downs.

Eighteen of the studies included a comparison of the outcomes of physical punishment to the outcomes of one or more alternative discipline responses. The grounding of older children was the only alternative discipline response that had more beneficial outcomes than did physical punishment.

All of the above led Larzelere, the author of the study, to conclude that *how* parents discipline is more important than *what* kind of discipline they use. The effects of physical punishment depend more on when and how it is implemented, its role in their parents' overall approach to discipline and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

The anti-smacking lobby has as one of its key objections that smacking is always, or inevitably becomes, abusive. (They argue that a child becomes desensitised to corporal

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The 'evils of smacking' are so loudly expounded by anti-smacking groups that one might be forgiven for assuming that all other forms of discipline are above reproach

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punishment and so an increased level of force is required to achieve the same effect.) However, the example of what has happened in Sweden clearly demonstrates this is not so. Since smacking was outlawed in Sweden, there has been a substantial reduction in the reported use of smacking by parents, but *no decrease in the incidence of child abuse*.<sup>5</sup>

Another argument commonly presented by opponents of smacking is that it is linked with (or even responsible for) the development of aggression and violent behaviours in the recipient of the punishment and thus also contributes to societal violence.

The associations between child aggression and frequency or intensity of corporal punishment are, in fact, curvilinear: that is, the most severely

punished children tend to be most aggressive; but also the most permissive parenting which eschews any kind of power assertion is associated with the development of high levels of aggression.<sup>6</sup> (See graph). The results of another study showed that moderately punitive parents produced the least aggressive boys, compared to very harsh or permissive parents.<sup>7</sup> In yet another study, the children of moderate users of physical punishment were found to be the least aggressive.<sup>8</sup>

## ■ Alternatives

The ‘evils of smacking’ are so loudly expounded by anti-smacking groups that one might be forgiven for assuming that all other forms of discipline are above reproach as far as their potential to harm is concerned. In fact, this is not the case at all. An article in the journal *Paediatrics* states “Recent work has suggested that punishment in any form<sup>9</sup> and verbal aggression<sup>10</sup> may have some of the same ill-effects as spanking”<sup>11</sup> (if improperly used).

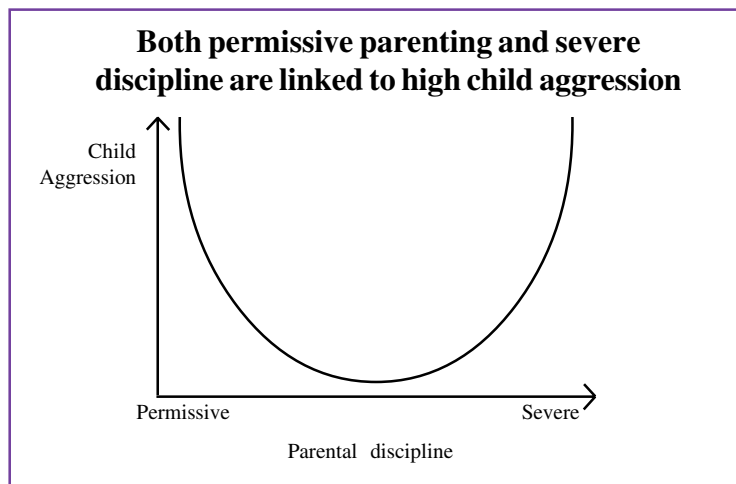
Emotional neglect and the absence of parental responsiveness are more closely linked to negative outcomes than coercive methods of discipline (such as smacking).<sup>12</sup> “The effects of emotional maltreatment can be severe and may have a destructive impact on development.<sup>13</sup> For instance, having received verbal aggression is associated with higher rates of physical aggression, delinquency and interpersonal problems.”<sup>14</sup>

It is unclear as yet whether outcomes (either negative or positive) are related to smacking *per se* or to other associated factors. The relationship between parent and child, the general attitude of the parent in their overall interactions

with the child and their approach to smacking and other methods of discipline may all be important in determining the outcome associated with corporal punishment.

T A Carey studied the use of punishment in child rearing. In his article entitled “Spare the rod and spoil the child”<sup>15</sup> the author summarises the conditions which must be met in order

It is important to note why smacking which is accompanied by reasoning has a greater likelihood of beneficial outcomes. The effect of physical punishment by itself and without explanation is merely to correct misbehaviour, it does not teach children alternative ways of behaving, facilitate learning or teach children what they should do. Hence it is important to accompany punishment with an explanation about what the correct behaviour should be.



The evidence seems to suggest that the use of smacking in child-rearing is not in and of itself a bad or harmful thing. Rather, it is the context and the attitude that determine whether or not this particular form of discipline is beneficial to the child’s development.

Smacking, when used correctly and therefore most effectively, should be administered in a consistent

## Scientific evidence for a universal anti-smacking recommendation is lacking.

for punishment of any kind, not necessarily physical, to be effective.

1. Punishment is best delivered soon after the associated incident rather than delayed.<sup>16</sup>
2. Punishment needs to be applied consistently and systematically and be sufficiently firm to suppress the behaviour.<sup>17,18</sup>
3. Punishment is more effective if delivered by someone whom the child feels positively about.<sup>19</sup>

manner at non-abusive levels to children of an appropriate age (as outlined above in Larzelere’s conclusions), with sufficient explanation and in the context of a loving and supportive relationship with the parent. As Dr Baumrind in her response to the Larzelere review states, “Prudent use of physical punishment in a family setting (although a risk factor) is no more a generative cause of offensive aggression in parents or children than getting out of bed in the morning (although a risk factor) is a generative cause of getting hit by a drunk driver.”<sup>20</sup>

A letter to the editor of *Paediatrics* clearly states that “Although other aspects of parenting are no less important, scientific evidence for a universal anti-spanking recommendation is lacking.”<sup>21</sup>

Baumrind's paper states, "a blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking by parents is not scientifically supportable."<sup>22</sup> She goes on to state later that "there is no expert consensus that spanking is a generative cause of negative outcomes in children and adults."<sup>23</sup> ■

*Alison Back, a graduate in Physiology, was Medical Researcher at The Christian Institute from 1997 to 1998.*

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**“Prudent use of physical punishment in a family setting ... is no more a generative cause of offensive aggression ... than getting out of bed in the morning ... is a generative cause of getting hit by a drunk driver.”**

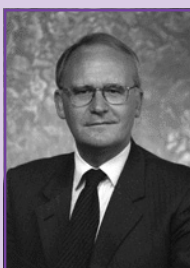
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## Government Consultation on Smacking

The Government argues that the law on parental smacking needs to be “clarified” in the light of the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the *Re: A* case (see *Advocate* Issue 1) which criticised the existing law. However, the Green Paper states: “we do not consider that the right way to do this is to ban all physical punishment.”<sup>21</sup> Their consultation on smacking which was due early in the new year, has not yet begun. Department of Health officials are suggesting it may commence in April. Meanwhile Barnardos, EPOCH and the NSPCC are launching a major campaign to criminalise smacking by parents.

An influential member of the Government supports this stance. Before taking up his current post as Home Office Minister and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords, Lord Williams of Mostyn was Chairman of the NSPCC's National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse. This Commission, part-funded by Channel 4, produced a report entitled “Childhood Matters”.<sup>2</sup>



Lord Williams : His NSPCC enquiry called for parental smacking to be a criminal offence

Although concerned with child abuse, this Commission decided to make the controversial recommendation that it should be made a criminal offence for parents to smack their own children. It referred to Section 1(7) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 which recognises the parental right to ‘reasonable chastisement’ of their children. It responded: “...occasions will arise when parents will strike a child. In these circumstances, children should be in precisely the same position as adults. It should be no defence, whether an assault be carried out by a parent or anyone else, that it was justified

on the grounds of the ‘reasonable chastisement’ of the child concerned. Section 1(7) ..should therefore be repealed in order to leave children subject to the same legal protection against assault as adults. This would simply require the police and prosecuting authorities to exercise their discretion, as they do already when deciding whether to charge or prosecute adults.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, repealing section 1(7) would not only render parents who smack their children liable to prosecution for common assault, a serious criminal offence with a penalty of up to six months in prison. The repeal could also result in parents being prosecuted for cruelty to a person under the age of sixteen contrary to section 1(1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933. This is a much more serious offence, as indicated by the maximum sentence of ten years. ■

<sup>1</sup> *Supporting Families*, A Consultation Document, The Home Office, 1998, para 5.9, page 42

<sup>2</sup> *Childhood Matters*, Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, Volume 1, The Stationery Office, 1996, page vii

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, section 5.44

## “Supporting Families”?

*Colin Hart takes the second of a two-part look at the Government’s Green Paper on the family*

### ■The argument so far

This article looks at the battle of ideas on the family which forms the background to the new Government Green Paper. Four key assumptions tend to underpin public policy debates on the family.

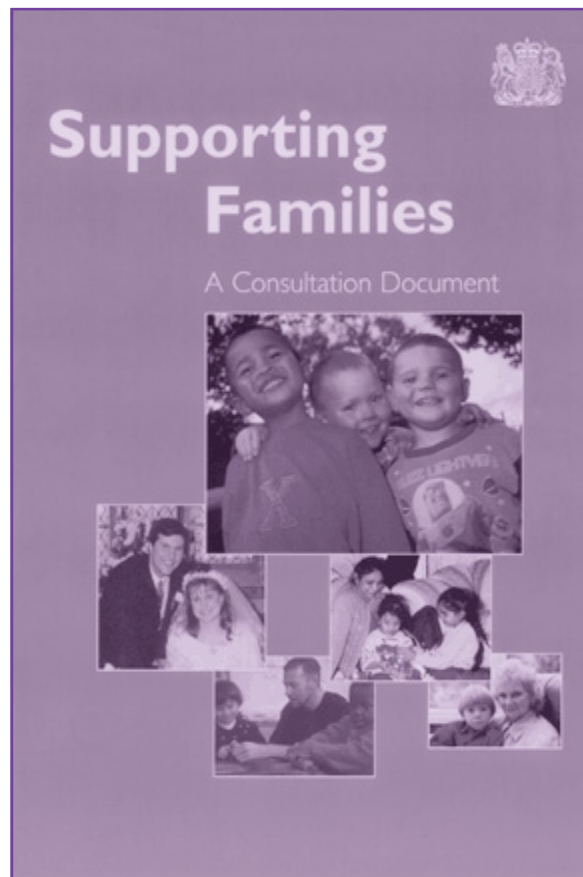
Two assumptions were considered in the first part of this article (see Issue 1). To recap:

*The first assumption* that tends to be made is that the family is only changing, not deteriorating.

Whilst there have been many changes in the family, any fair examination of history must conclude that the fundamental stability of the family based on marriage has remained intact. Figures for the proportion of children born outside of marriage, the proportion of couples who cohabit before marriage and the proportion of marriages that end in divorce remained relatively constant over the centuries. However, since 1950 a process of very rapid change has been underway, change which can hardly be described as positive.

*The second assumption* starkly stated as “A mother’s place is in the workforce” encapsulates much of the thinking on family policy. There is growing pressure on mothers to go out to work, including mothers with pre-school children. The Government has launched major initiatives to encourage mothers to use commercial childcare.

The third and fourth assumptions that tend to underpin debates on the family will be considered in the course of this article.



These assumptions are that:

- Low income and other factors have more impact on children than whether they live with two parents; and
- Public policy should not privilege marriage or restrict divorce.

### ■The Role of Research

Amongst those who are concerned with public policy on the family, positions are generally defended on the basis of research claims. To make assertions on

the basis of right or wrong is considered to be ‘preaching’. Research is held out to be unbiased and the primary method of ending disputes about fact. Social science is now accorded greater weight than beliefs about marriage and the family which have endured for thousands of years.

But even if researchers were completely unbiased, social science can only tell you *what is the case*. It cannot tell you *what should be the case*. Only beliefs about the nature of man and society can tell you that.

The way the Government values research can be seen clearly in its Green Paper, “Supporting Families”. Its proposed new National Family and Parenting Institute will “influence the agenda for research on family and parenting issues and analyse and disseminate research findings”.<sup>1</sup> This body will advise Government and voluntary groups on issues relating to family policy. It will also work closely with the new national telephone helpline

for parents.

The fact that research is only at best descriptive is very well illustrated by the issue of divorce. Here research does tell us a great deal about the impact on the adults and children involved. But researchers and politicians seem unable to determine the way forward other than to treat the symptoms.

Divorce reforms started by the previous Government are defended because “research shows” that conflict damages children and, it is said, the present divorce law encourages conflict.

As a matter of fact, after several decades of escalating divorce rates, the effect on children has been well documented. There is now little dispute that children from broken homes tend to have poorer health, lower income and lower educational attainment. They are generally more likely to be unemployed, to commit crime, to have a child outside marriage and to get a divorce themselves.

Understanding the claims about why divorce is linked to poorer outcomes for children is one of the keys to understanding why certain policies are advocated as a ‘help’ to marriages under strain and to minimize the harm to children during divorce. It is to these explanations that we now turn.

## ■ Why are there poor outcomes for children?

As in all social statistics, only an average is referred to when it is said that children from broken homes *normally* do worse than those from

stable homes. Public policy should primarily be concerned with what normally is the case. There will be *some* children of married parents who do *worse* than children from broken homes. There will also be *some* children who do *better* after their parents’ divorce than before. These are the exceptions to the rule.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is one of the main bodies independent of Government which funds research in the social sciences. It is not known for any ideological commitment to marriage. Liberal thinkers on the

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It is significant that the JRF research review ... which comes from a ‘liberal’ stable firmly accepts that children from broken homes normally do suffer poor outcomes.

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family tend to be very comfortable with the sort of research it sponsors.

In 1998 JRF published a review of 200 studies on divorce and separation by Bryan Rodgers and Jan Pryor.

*Divorce and Separation - The Outcomes for Children* states that:

“Children of separated families have a higher probability of:

- being in poverty and poor housing;
- being poorer when they are adults;
- behavioural problems;
- performing less well at school;
- needing medical treatment;
- leaving school/home when young;
- becoming sexually active, pregnant, or a parent at an early age;
- depressive symptoms, high levels of smoking and drinking, and drug use during adolescence and adulthood.”<sup>2</sup>

For the past ten years many have questioned whether children from broken homes are disadvantaged *at all*. So it is

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is not known for any ideological commitment to marriage.

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significant that the JRF research review by Rodgers and Pryor, which comes from a ‘liberal’ stable<sup>3</sup> firmly accepts that children from broken homes normally do suffer poor outcomes.

These conclusions are completely in line with what most assume to be common sense. But, when it comes to explaining *why* children experience poor outcomes, there is little unanimity amongst social policy analysts.

Most researchers<sup>4</sup> agree that conflict, low income and loss of a parent do damage children. There is an inter-relationship between these three factors. But there is strong disagreement about the degree of influence of each factor.

### ***Socio-economic deprivation***

It would be pointless to deny the fact that socio-economic factors *can* damage children’s health and wellbeing. But many claim that low income actually has *more* impact on children than divorce or separation *per se*.

The Green Paper states that “there is more child poverty, often as a direct consequence of family breakdown”.<sup>5</sup>

Poverty used to be defined in absolute terms. Now the poverty line is usually drawn at some proportion of average earnings.

As average earnings increase, so does the level at which people are deemed to be ‘in poverty’. As Norman Dennis points out, this creates “permanent poverty”.<sup>6</sup>

Kathleen Kiernan of the London School of Economics believes that factors before and after divorce influence the outcomes in later adulthood. In one of her studies on the effect of divorce on children Kiernan concludes:

“Our findings suggest that avoiding divorce, no doubt, confers benefits on children, but the magnitude of these benefits are not so large if the conditions that may lead people to divorce in the first place are taken into account.”<sup>7</sup>

This conclusion is based on the questionable assumption that the conditions which “*may*” lead people to divorce are already known. But this is the very purpose of research in the first place. However, even Kiernan admits: “Undoubtedly, poverty and behavioural problems are important factors in reducing educational success and parental divorce can amplify both.”<sup>8</sup>

In summary Kiernan’s view is that only a true analysis of the family circumstances before and after divorce can yield information on why children suffer negatively. But some of the conclusions must of their very nature be conjecture since social science can

never ask *what would have happened* if a particular couple had not divorced. It can only look at general trends and probabilities.

Like Kiernan, Rodgers and Pryor argue for the need to study the circumstances “before and after” properly to assess the effect of divorce on children. But unlike Kiernan, they contest the view that socio-economic factors are determinative:

“Outcomes for children in stepfamilies suggest, furthermore, that the restoration of adequate economic resources

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The Green Paper states that “there is more child poverty, often as a direct consequence of family breakdown”.

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does *not* compensate for the impact of experiencing several changes in the family structure.”<sup>9</sup> [emphasis added].

They conclude:

“Viewed overall, these studies indicate that poorer socio-economic circumstances play a mediating role in the association between parental separation and certain outcomes for children and this seems most likely in the area of educational attainment. However, it does not account for all of the association, and for some other outcomes, including delinquency and mental health in adulthood, it appears to play a very minor role”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conflict**

When the last Conservative Government brought in legislation for no-fault divorce it was argued by the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, that it is parental conflict before, during and after divorce that is the major cause of children experiencing poor outcomes.

The old maxim “staying together for the sake of the children” became

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“Undoubtedly, poverty and behavioural problems are important factors in reducing educational success and parental divorce can amplify both.”

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“divorcing for the sake of the children”. Divorce legislation was rewritten so that no reason was needed for divorce. It was argued that dropping the requirement to state in a divorce petition that your spouse committed adultery or behaved unreasonably would reduce the acrimony during the divorce. A new system of mediation was also proposed to help couples decide the future for children, house and money, rather than litigating in the courts.

The present Government has not yet implemented the Mackay divorce reforms although *Supporting Families* makes clear it intends to.<sup>11</sup>

There can be no doubt that conflict between the parents does damage children, but this does not mean that an easy divorce will make things better. The *Exeter Family Study*<sup>12</sup> was frequently quoted by senior Conservative Ministers during the debates on the divorce legislation as proving that conflict was bad for children. The study did indeed demonstrate this, but it also found that conflict was a “very minor” consideration. Dr Tripp co-author of the study argued:

“..it’s actually the loss of a parent from the family by the child which seems to be much more significant than some of the other factors which we’d previously believed may be very important. I suppose the most obvious of those is conflict. We know that conflict is damaging in the sense that it undermines children’s well being and makes them feel less good about themselves

## The Exeter Family Study



Family breakdown and its impact on children

MÓNICA COCKEY AND JOHN TRIPP

when their parents fight, but our data suggests that that's really a very minor effect compared with the effects that we see when a parent leaves the house or leaves the home".<sup>13</sup>

The study found that children cope better with parents fighting than with a parent leaving: "In parental conflict during marriage, the child may be able to remain on the side-lines, whereas after divorce they may be obliged to take a central role....The present study provides clear evidence that low self-esteem is very much more common among children who have experienced their parents' separation where there is continuing conflict, poor communication or where the child is dissatisfied with the contact arrangements. It follows that separation and divorce do not necessarily reduce damaging conflict and, indeed, that as a generality the reverse may be true. In other words, the experience of most children whose parents divorce is of *increased* conflict over an extended period, with the child involved to an extent that may not have been the case while the marriage lasted."<sup>14</sup>

The authors of the Exeter Study sought to shift the emphasis away from blaming *conflict* as the source of the problems for children towards isolating the cause as the *actual loss of a parent*. As far as children are concerned a bad marriage is better than a good divorce.

It is interesting that although the Exeter Study was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Foundation did not publish the final report. The study strongly challenged some of the accepted dogmas about divorce. With the Rodgers and Pryor review, JRF

both funded the research and published it. The review reaches quite different conclusions on the impact of a child being separated from a parent.



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### **Parental deprivation**

To say that a boy or girl cannot cope because they miss their dad after a divorce would be to say nothing particularly new. The fact that a boy's work at school takes a nosedive after

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As far as children are  
concerned a bad marriage  
is better than a good  
divorce.

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his dad leaves home is not something which would particularly surprise most teachers.

Yet for many researchers these are all controversial claims. Of all the factors

which are used to explain children's poor outcomes following divorce, parental loss is the one which most challenges the freedom of adults to behave in the way they want.

Parental loss is *the* factor most neglected in the Government's plans which primarily address socio-economic circumstances through such measures as the benefits system and through childcare to encourage lone parents to go out to work.

Most studies have confirmed that children who are *bereaved* do better than children whose parents *divorce*, although *neither* group do as well as children from "intact" families.

Here the JRF review agrees: "Overall, the findings on outcomes for children who have experienced the death of a parent suggest that children are adversely affected, but this does not apply to the same range of poor outcomes as shown by children from separated families."<sup>15</sup>

Rodgers and Pryor highlight the obvious fact that bereaved children and children separated from a parent both "share the impact of parental loss and, more similarly, the longer-term experience of parental absence (more often of fathers than mothers, in both groups)".<sup>16</sup>

But it is a massive leap to conclude from this that:

"the absence of a parent figure is not the most influential feature of separation for children's development."<sup>17</sup>

Of course it is true to say that children who are bereaved *and* children from broken homes both "lose" a parent.

But Rodgers and Pryor then go on to claim that there must be more important factors at work than parental loss: “The overriding impression from studies of bereavement is that neither loss nor absence are of great importance”.<sup>18</sup>

The authors of the JRF report appear not to understand two crucial differences between children who lose a parent through death and children who lose a parent through divorce.

Firstly, bereavement does not cause a child to question the past or to doubt the love of the parent who died. In fact bereavement can do the opposite. It can strongly affirm the past. But divorce can cause a child to question everything. In the child’s mind the whole relationship with the parent who has left can be raked over.

Secondly, right up until a divorce, even with considerable conflict between the parents, children can stay on the sidelines. After divorce, access arrangements can become a great source of stress to the child and the parent being visited. Each parent can criticise the other, and further problems arise if another adult joins either parent’s household.

The JRF report notes “most children in separating families do lose daily contact with one parent (most often their father) and do experience acute distress from this loss. The time they spend with that parent often decreases as they get older and a sizeable minority of such children lose contact altogether with non-resident parents.”<sup>19</sup>

Whilst conceding that there can be “acute distress” from the loss of a parent through separation, Rodgers and Pryor state “These problems do not appear to have a serious lasting impact.”<sup>20</sup> Rodgers and Pryor seem to reach their conclusions *despite all their own evidence*. They argue that

divorce or separation is not the issue, or at least it is not of “great importance”. The issue, they say, is the process behind them, the changes and influences which occur over time before, during and after the event.

Rodgers and Pryor are profoundly resigned to a high divorce culture. They conclude their report by arguing for ‘children’s rights’, counselling for families at the time of separation, more information and the acknowledgement in public policy of ‘family diversity’.

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Policy researchers from whatever perspective now generally admit that children whose parents divorce do experience poorer outcomes

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### ■ Crisis or Process?

It is now much easier for the Government to say that “marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children and remains the choice of the majority of people in Britain.”<sup>21</sup> This is a considerable step forward from five years ago, when such claims were widely disputed. Now social policy researchers from whatever perspective generally admit that children whose parents divorce do experience poorer outcomes than children from homes where their parents remain together.

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Rodgers and Pryor are profoundly resigned to a high divorce culture

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Amongst influential social affairs analysts the hunt is on to explain *why*. Are couples who get divorced already in the position of being more financially and educationally disadvantaged before divorce? Does the conflict which so damages children in fact start long before the divorce?

The tendency now is to emphasise that divorce is part of a *process*, not the actual *cause* of children’s poor outcomes in isolation. There is *some* truth in this. People’s attitudes do not just form at the point of divorce.

Equally a child may be in difficult socio-economic circumstances long before divorce. Several factors may inter-relate.

A child who lives with an alcoholic parent, or a parent who is unfaithful in marriage will be affected *before* a divorce. In extreme cases where there is actual child abuse, a child will obviously benefit from being separated from the offending parent, but the scars will still remain into adult life.

However in most cases it is likely that divorce involves none of these things, not even adultery.<sup>22</sup>

In most divorces one or both parties believe that they are incompatible or that there is no way a bad relationship will improve.

It is to be expected that there will be *some* correlation between socio-economic factors or conflict in the home and the poor outcomes for children. But this has been very much overplayed. Just as research has begun to show the relatively minor role these factors really play researchers are now exploring new avenues and concluding that the real subject of research should not be divorce at all.

Rodgers and Pryor quote with approval one study which argues

“Speaking precisely, we are not generally interested in the effects of divorce itself on children”.<sup>23</sup> This is intended to be a rather clever quote, but it actually reveals the true attitude of the authors since they make clear elsewhere their view that loss of a parent is not of “great importance”.<sup>24</sup>

The process theory seems to be spawning a whole research industry devoted to avoiding the obvious conclusion that divorce is bad for children and that instead somehow all the problems originate before or after the divorce.

All the theories fall down with the common sense objection that 30, 50 or 100 years ago socio-economic depriva-

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Rodgers and Pryor quote with approval one study which argues

“Speaking precisely, we are not generally interested in the effects of divorce itself on children”.

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tion was much worse than it is today. Moreover there have always been, and there always will be, conflicts between husbands and wives.

The difference between the past and today is that people now think they can solve problems by getting a divorce.

In the past, for better or worse, people worked out their problems by remaining married. Today there is practically no social stigma against divorce and the freedom for adults to change their sexual arrangements is generally seen as a desirable policy objective.

A 1996 report on parenting published by JRF addresses the central issue : “The growth of individualism as a dominant social value, with its emphasis on self-fulfilment and personal autonomy, raises vital questions about the values surrounding parenthood and family life.”<sup>25</sup>

Surely, as it has been argued, “the pursuit of self gratification” is not compatible “with the ‘principal mission’ of the family, namely the nurture and training of the future generation”.<sup>26</sup>

## ■Public policy on marriage

The future of our society is directly linked to the stability of the family. Divorce is now a serious problem, but married families are still considerably more stable than all the alternatives. It remains the case that most people still want to marry and that most marriages last for life.

The family and our society is being profoundly undermined by divorce. It is therefore essential that marriage should be strengthened and privileged in public policy.

One argument against this is that it would discriminate against children from lone parent or cohabiting families. In fact, some 70% of all children are raised in married households, 7% in cohabiting households and only 8% of children in lone parent never-married households.<sup>27</sup> Around 1% of children are bereaved, but very significantly 15% of children come from lone parent households where the parent is *divorced or separated*.<sup>28</sup>

This means that children in two thirds of lone parent households *could have lived* in a married household. The more divorce there is, the more lone parenthood is created.

Divorce affects children, but it also has an impact on the adults involved. Divorcees are generally more likely to smoke or have an alcohol problem; they are at greater risk of ill-health and premature death. Divorced men are twice as likely to die of heart disease as married men. Admission rates to psychiatric units are almost ten times greater for divorced people than for married people.<sup>29</sup>

More and more elderly people will be living alone because of divorce. Society has an interest in marriage because married couples look after each other when ill or elderly.

Whatever the public benefits of marriage the Green Paper warns that, “governments have to be wary about intervening in areas of private life and intimate emotion.”<sup>30</sup> It goes on to say that family policy has “suffered from the misguided view that there are large levers that governments can pull to affect how families behave. The truth is that families are, and will always be, mainly shaped by private choices well beyond the influence of government. That is how it should be.”<sup>31</sup>

However, despite what is said about the need for a hands-off approach, the Government is stepping up direct intervention in many areas.

Secular baby naming ceremonies are proposed. Health visitors are to be given an enhanced role. Childcare tax credits are to be given to encourage mothers with young children to go out to work. There is to be a telephone helpline for parents. There is to be improved access to courses which teach parenting skills. Couples will be able to draw up a divorce settlement before they even marry. This “pre-nuptial” agreement will be more

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“The growth of individualism as a dominant social value, with its emphasis on self-fulfilment and personal autonomy, raises vital questions about the values surrounding parenthood and family life.”

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binding than the marriage contract which, after no-fault divorce takes effect, can be ended on demand. Whatever the rights and wrongs of each policy, there can be no doubt that the new interventions proposed have the deliberate intention of affecting how families behave.

## ■ Marriage, Poverty, and the tax-benefits system

The Government states its belief that “marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children and remains the choice of the majority of people in Britain”.<sup>32</sup> If it really is true that marriage is the surest foundation for raising children it should be an objective of public policy to privilege marriage. But the reality is that marriage is often treated as an irrelevant factor to public policy. Or worse still marriage is discriminated *against*.

This is certainly true when it comes to divorce. The full legal apparatus of the state is put behind an absolute right to divorce. Once the 1996 Family Law Act comes into force there will be a 12 or 18 month period to wait and optional marriage counselling, but the State has come down decisively on the side of facilitating divorce.

Marriage is also discriminated against in the area of taxation. If this point is accepted it becomes highly relevant to all the discussions about the link between children’s poor outcomes and the economic circumstances of the family.

The benefits system is based on the income needed to provide for the

adults and children in the household. Obviously to maintain the same standard of living a married couple with four children needs a greater income than a married couple with one child.

The benefits system takes different household sizes into account, but the tax system does not. Unlike many other tax systems throughout the western world, the UK tax system does not consider the needs of the household. It looks at income.

**If it really is true that marriage is the surest foundation for raising children it should be an objective of public policy to privilege marriage.**

Single earner married couples are discriminated against because they are taxed just as if they were a single person. Very little account is taken of the fact that in a married household there are two adults instead of one.

Government figures show that a single earner married couple with two children on average earnings (£300 per week) has a standard of living which is

*half* that of a single person, and 30% *lower* than that of a lone parent with two children on the same income.<sup>33</sup>

If a wife does not go out to work, or only does a little part time work, her personal tax allowance of £4175 is worthless. She cannot transfer her allowance to her earning husband. Government figures show that stay-at-home mums comprise half of mothers with pre-school children, a third of mothers with children aged 5 - 9 and a quarter of mothers with children aged 10 - 15.<sup>34</sup> Therefore a very large number of families are affected by neglecting stay-at-home mums in this way.

For those households with below half average income, there are more children in married households than any other kind of household. This is true whether or not housing costs are taken into consideration. (See Fig. 1)

Though lone parents are statistically more likely to be in the lowest income group *it is also a fact that there are several hundred thousand more children in ‘poverty’ in married households than there are in lone parent households.*

There are two further points. Firstly the consequences of being in the

**Figure 1: Number of Children living in households with below half average income by family type and economic status of parents, 1996-97**

	Millions of children					
	Before Housing Costs			After Housing Costs		
	Married	Cohabiting	Lone Parents	Married	Cohabiting	Lone Parents
2 working parents	0.3	(1)	0.0	0.4	(1)	0.0
1 working parent	0.8	(1)	0.2	1.0	(1)	0.3
0 working parents	0.7	(1)	1.0	0.8	(1)	1.6
Total	1.8	0.3	1.2	2.2	0.4	1.9
	( Combined total 3.3 )			( Combined total 4.5 )		

(1) The figures for co-habiting couples are not shown because their respective sample sizes are too small to provide robust figures at the required level of detail. However, approximately half of the children belonging to all such couples live in households with at least one working parent.  
Source : Hansard : House of Commons Written Answers 13 January 1999 col 223

lowest 10% income group are more serious for a married couple than a lone parent. The reason is simply that the same income has to provide for two adults instead of one.

Secondly, two thirds of children live with lone parents who *used to be married*. So the very 'poverty' experienced in lone parent households could well have been the result of a divorce. Lone parent poverty is in fact yet another argument for publicly supporting marriage.

### *The Married Couples' Allowance*

The only provision in the whole tax system which privileges marriage is the married couples' allowance (MCA). Successive Conservative Chancellors cut the value of the allowance. Its current value is £285 per year. From April its value falls to £190.

The Green Paper on the family suggests that the MCA should be scrapped entirely. This would raise £1.7 billion for the Treasury<sup>35</sup> which the Green



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of divorce suffer most because they do not have a father or, more rarely, a mother, in the home.

As in the USA, those working in public policy have generally come to accept the link between divorce and poor outcomes. We should not have to wait another five years for more research to confirm that children need two parents.

Paper argues could be used to increase child benefit..

### ■ Conclusion

Divorce is the single biggest social problem facing our society, yet public policy does very little to discourage it. No doubt children are affected by socio-economic circumstances and by family conflict. These things have always existed, and there was a time when poverty meant absolute poverty.

But divorce is the problem. Rodgers and Pryor and people like them have devised ingenious arguments to deny the common sense notion that children

We know more than enough to act now to support married two parent families. A wrong analysis of family breakdown based on false assumptions has led to the Government failing to address the main issues or in some cases promoting policies which will actively harm the family.

There are many practical steps (such as those opposite) which can be taken to promote marriage. And there is no reason why these steps cannot be taken now. ■

### ■ References

- <sup>1</sup> *Supporting Families*, A Consultation Document, The Home Office, 1998, page 9
- <sup>2</sup> See *Divorce and separation : The outcomes for children*, Foundations series, JRF, June 1998. The full report is published as Rodgers B and Pryor J *Divorce and Separation : The outcomes for children*, JRF, 1998
- <sup>3</sup> There are some very radical ideas contained in the report.
- <sup>4</sup> See comments on the broad theoretical explanations by Kiernan K, *The Legacy of Parental Divorce*, CASE Paper 1, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, 1997, page 2
- <sup>5</sup> *Supporting Families*, *Op cit* page 4

- <sup>6</sup> Dennis N *The Invention of Permanent Poverty*, IEA, 1997
- <sup>7</sup> Kiernan K, *Op cit* page 39
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, page 12
- <sup>9</sup> Rodgers B and Pryor J, *Op cit* page 43
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, page 38
- <sup>11</sup> One reason is lack of success of mediation pilot schemes
- <sup>12</sup> Cockett M and Tripp Dr J *The Exeter Family Study*, University of Exeter Press, 1994
- <sup>13</sup> Dr John Tripp, co-author of the Exeter Study speaking on BBC 1 Panorama, *For the sake of the children*, 7 February 1994
- <sup>14</sup> Cockett M and Tripp Dr J *Op cit*, page 58
- <sup>15</sup> Rodgers B and Pryor J *Op cit*, page 34
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, page 33
- <sup>17</sup> Foundations, *Divorce and separation:*

*The Outcomes for children*, June 1998, page 3

- <sup>18</sup> Rodgers B and Pryor J *Op cit*, page 40
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, page 39
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, page 40
- <sup>21</sup> *Supporting Families*, *Op cit*, Introduction para 8, page 4
- <sup>22</sup> Only around one quarter (25.9%) of all divorces under the present system are based on the ground of adultery. This is with a system where it is generally accepted there are incentives to make false allegations in order to obtain a "quickie divorce". See *Marriage, Divorce and Adoption Statistics*, 1995, Series FM2 No 23, Office for National Statistics, 1998, page 91
- <sup>23</sup> Rodgers B and Pryor J *Op cit*, page 51
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, page 40
- <sup>25</sup> Ferri E and Smith K *Parenting in the 1990s*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation/

Family Policy Studies Centre, 1996, pages 8, 9

- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, page 9
- <sup>27</sup> Hansard : House of Commons : 19 November 1998 col 763
- <sup>28</sup> *Loc cit*
- <sup>29</sup> *Marriage Support and the Secure Society*, Jewish Marriage Council/ Relate/ Tavistock Marriage Studies Institute/ Marriage Care/ One Plus One, December 1997, Appendix 2
- <sup>30</sup> *Supporting Families*, *Op cit* page 4
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, page 5
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, page 4
- <sup>33</sup> Hansard: House of Commons: 5 June 1998 wa col 386 and *Representations for the 1999 Budget*, CARE, July 1998
- <sup>34</sup> Hansard: House of Commons: 19 November 1998 wa col 763
- <sup>35</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 14 February 1999

## ■ Action on marriage

### *The legal status of marriage*

- Legislation should be introduced to allow couples to have their own binding marriage contract, whereby divorce is only possible in the event of proven fault such as adultery.
- Steps to give cohabitants more legal rights should be abandoned.
- Marriage ceremonies, such as those performed in discos or for TV shows, which trivialise the institution of marriage and the seriousness of the commitment, should be banned.

### *The tax-benefits system*

- As a first step the married couples' allowance should be restored to its full value.
- Stay-at-home mums or those who look after disabled relatives should be allowed to transfer their tax allowance to their husbands.
- Financial incentives for mothers to put pre-school children in commercial childcare should be stopped.
- There should be a complete review of the tax-benefits system to examine the many ways in which it incentivises feckless behaviour and unstable parenting.

### *Marriage counselling*

- The Government should fund marriage counselling agencies on the basis of *marriages saved*.
- Government funding should be removed from counselling agencies or research bodies which are not committed to saving marriages or which view marriage as equivalent to any other configuration of adults and children.

### *Divorce*

- The no-fault divorce reforms should be scrapped.
- The divorce system operating in Northern Ireland (which has the lowest divorce rate in the UK) should be adopted in England, Wales and Scotland.
- The Government should abandon plans for couples to be able to draw up a divorce settlement before they even marry. Pre-nuptial agreements profoundly undermine marriage.

- The uncertainty and inconsistency of the whole system of divorce settlements currently provides financial incentives to divorce through speculative litigation. The Government has proposed a fairer system based on a 50-50 split of assets in the normal case. This certainly would be better than the present lottery, but courts should be required to take into account any misconduct of the parties (husband *or* wife) to a much greater extent than now.
- Much more regard should be had to the behaviour of the adults involved when deciding which parent children should live with.
- It has been estimated that the cost of divorce to the taxpayer was £5 billion<sup>1</sup> in 1994. Proposals to liberalise the divorce law still further will put up this bill.

### *Public promotion of marriage*

- People in public life who behave recklessly and irresponsibly in their own lives should not be permitted to be involved in drawing up public policy on the family.
- Public figures who brazenly commit adultery cannot be part of a Government which seeks to support or promote marriage. Turbulent private lives indicate a lack of judgement, and must surely affect a person's ability to do his job. *If not* then the person must be callous. Either way they are not fit for high public office.
- All areas of public policy should be assessed for their impact on marriage.
- The Government should drop their plans to legalise the promotion of homosexuality in schools. Currently 'Clause 28' of the 1988 Local Government Act specifically bans the promotion in schools of 'pretended' homosexual families. If this was allowed then a very strong message would be sent out to young people that children do not need a mother and a father; that sexual relationships outside of marriage are good and that same-sex relationships are equivalent to marriage.
- There is merit in the Government's proposals for mother and baby units for lone parents. ■

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Library: Research Paper 96/42, 21st March 1996, page 74

# Summary

## ■ ‘Supporting Families’?

After several decades of escalating divorce rates the effect on children has been well documented. There is little dispute that children from broken homes tend to have poorer health, lower income, and lower educational attainment. They are more likely to be unemployed, to commit crime, and to get divorced themselves.

Why should this be? Social science researchers point to three main factors connected with divorce:

- Low income;
- Conflict; and
- Loss of a parent.

Common sense and unbiased social science research indicates that it is the loss of the parent which is *the* key factor. Hence marriage should be supported.

The Government is able to state that: “marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children”, yet in a number of areas public policy decisions actively work against marriage as an institution:

- Divorce law is to be further reformed so that pre-nuptial agreements for divorce are more binding than the marriage itself;
- A married woman wishing to stay at home and look after her children is disadvantaged in the tax system because her tax allowance is not transferable. Her work is unrewarded;
- The Green Paper suggests that the Married Couples’ Allowance, the only tax-break for marriage, should be scrapped.

Instead of this, public policy should positively support marriage in a variety of ways including:

- Enhancing the legal status of marriage;
- Supporting marriage through the tax-benefits system; and
- Scrapping the pending no-fault divorce reforms.

## ■ Dare to Discipline

Surveys in the UK find that 90% of parents have smacked their children. So-called ‘children’s rights’ advocates within the scientific community can only pursue their campaign to ban smacking because until very recently few paediatricians have thought that research into the effects of smacking (as opposed to actual abuse) is even necessary. What research there is confirms (in over 90% of the main studies) that smacking has either beneficial or neutral outcomes for children.

The alternatives to smacking are not above reproach. For instance, having received verbal aggression is associated with higher rates of physical aggression, delinquency and interpersonal problems. The children of parents who use moderate physical punishment were found by three studies to be the least aggressive.

The anti-smacking lobby believes that smacking is always, or inevitably becomes, abusive. This simply does not stand up to closer scrutiny. Attempts to criminalise parents who smack their children are blatantly unjustified.

# Faith *in the* Family

The married family is the future. It is *the* most stable relationship in which to raise children. It follows that, for the sake of our Nation’s children, public policy must uphold marriage - *the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.*

*Faith in the Family* is a new project of *The Christian Institute* which seeks to promote marriage and family values in public

policy. *The Advocate* is a bi-monthly publication of news and comment on the major issues facing the family today.

*The Christian Institute* is a policy research organisation which seeks to uphold historic, Biblical, Christian truth. Since being established as a charity in 1990 *The Institute* has specialised in marriage & the family, religious liberties, education, the case against drugs legalisation, and the constitution.



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