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Greer Litton Fox

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# **CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: CLUES AND CAVEATS FROM SOCIAL RESEARCH**

**Greer Litton Fox\***

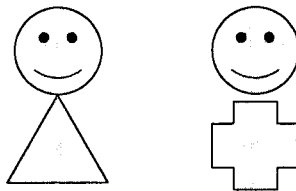
## **I. INTRODUCTION**

To provide a social science perspective on child well-being within the brief time frame allotted by the symposium organizer, I will start with a cartoon, end with a poem, and address the following three points in between: 1) provide an overview of research on child well-being, 2) review important shifts in the demography of contemporary families that have implications for child well-being, and 3) share with you briefly my own views as a family sociologist about the wisdom of child-centered family policy.

## **II. THE CARTOON**

**Listen to me. Mom  
doesn't want you  
to have a dog,  
does she?**

**No....**



**Do you really think Santa Claus  
is going to bring you something  
Mom doesn't want you to have?**

**OOO!!  
Supreme  
Court stuff!**

**Figure 1. The Language of Interests**

In Figure 1 I have reconstructed a Charles Schultz

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\* Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN.

cartoon featuring Lucy and Linus. The children of Shultz's Peanuts comic strip may well be America's most famous cartoon kids. I would point out that the Peanuts kids are not children per se, but the representation of children from the perspective of an adult cartoonist. Cartoon children more closely aligned with the wit and humor of children are the infamous children from South Park, products of the imagination of youthful originators, wildly popular among school-aged children, and widely condemned and suppressed by adults. In this particular cartoon, Lucy and Linus are discussing Linus' wish for a puppy for Christmas. Lucy points out that when the interests of the parent diverge from that of the child, the parent will win. Linus, in response, calls up an authority more powerful than parents—the Supreme Court. I use this cartoon, not because it's funny—it is not, but because it highlights the *language of interests*, as in *children's interests*. It shows nicely how the language of interests immediately presumes the competition of interests; it conjures up images of power differentials between the competing parties; it alludes to the use of advocacy to balance out power differences; it suggests that the competition of interests is at heart a political struggle, and how, in the absence of compromise, the parties must resort to adjudicated resolutions imposed by a higher authority.

### III. THE SCIENCE OF CHILD WELL-BEING

I want to turn from that language to the language of social science. Social science is more concerned with probabilities, patterns, and distributions and less with cases and outlines. We search and attempt to account for regularities in social behavior, the broad patterns of the middle mass whose attitudes, decisions, and actions give texture and contour to social conventionality. We concentrate for the most part on people and behaviors that lie below the radar screen, so to speak, of non-normative behavior. Indeed, the cases that seem to give rise to much discussion in law are those that lie on the outer boundaries of social behavior. Most social scientists would delete them from further consideration, as outliers, as oddball eccentricities that skew a distribution and distort one's analysis. And this discarding of the peculiar case, the inexplicable outlier, is justified when one's interest is in the overall patterning of behavior of a

group.

Now, having set the stage, let me share with you very briefly something of the explosion of research in the area of child well-being. I will start with the concept of child well-being, look at patterns in the social distribution of child well-being, and then touch on the theoretical models driving research in this area.

#### A. *Defining Child Well-being*

The definition of children's well-being usually includes three components: physiological health, cognitive achievement, and socioemotional competence. A child is considered to be doing well if he or she is growing normally and can engage without restrictions in age-appropriate activities, is attaining and maintaining age-appropriate levels of intellectual performance, and is developing the capacity to enter into and sustain positive social relationships over time. A good illustration of measures of child well-being comes from the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a longitudinal and multigenerational study of a representative sample of some 19,000 U.S. adults and their families that has been ongoing since 1968.<sup>1</sup> Child well-being in this study emerges as a composite of parent, teacher, and child reports of health conditions, social relationships, and scores on standardized achievement tests.

In defining child well-being, researchers may or may not include all three components. Moreover, operational definitions—that is, the actual data used to measure each component, and modes of collecting data (for example, through parent or teacher reports or respondent self-report, direct observation of interactions, or use of file or case records)—can vary across studies. One of the frustrations voiced by other professionals about social science research is that the conclusions about child well-being vary from one study to another. At least some of the inconsistency across child outcome research can be attributed to the use of different definitions of child well-being and differences in the arcane elements of study design. In using social research, it

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1. Sandra L. Hofferth, *Healthy Environments, Healthy Children: Children in Families*. Report on the 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS). (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.) 1997

pays to be cognizant of study definitions and methods, so that one can assess the amount of credence to attach to study results.

### B. *The Socially Competent Child*

The component of child well-being that has captured the most attention from social researchers is socioemotional well-being, more specifically the development of social competence in children.<sup>2</sup> Social competence is commonly operationalized in terms of characteristic behaviors either manifest or avoided by the child, with distinctions drawn between internalizing problems, such as withdrawn or distressed behaviors and externalizing problems, such as acting out, aggressive and disruptive behaviors.

Child developmentalists have identified three minimal conditions necessary for generating social competence in children. These conditions include a) social support and affirmation, b) the existence of rules, constraints and regulation, and c) psychological autonomy.<sup>3</sup> That is, to develop the capacity to engage in positive social relations with others, children need to experience an environment characterized by interpersonal warmth and supportive interactions, an environment characterized by regularity, consistency, and the monitoring of rule-guided behaviors which fosters the development of the child's capacity to regulate his or her own behavior, and an environment that recognizes, welcomes, and responds to the child's unique thoughts and self expressions so that the child develops a sense of himself or herself as a separate and valued human being.

The environmental settings that foster social competence in children need not be limited to family-based settings, but should include school and community settings as well. Indeed, a test of the adequacy of healthy environments for

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2. See Arnold J. Sameroff et al., *Family and Social Influences on the Development of Child Competence*, in *FAMILIES, RISK, AND COMPETENCE*, 161-85 (Michael Lewis & Candice Feiring eds., 1998).

3. See Brian K. Barber & J.A. Olsen, *Socialization in Context: Connection, Regulation, and Autonomy in the Family, School, Neighborhood, and with Peers*, 12 *J. ADOLESCENT RES.*, 287-315 (1997); Brian K. Barber et al., *Associations Between Parental Psychological and Behavioral Control and Youth Internalized and Externalized Behaviors*, 65 *CHILD DEV.*, 1120-36 (1994).

children rests on the extent to which they meet these minimal conditions for social competence.

### C. *The Social Distribution of Child Well-being*

Viewing child well-being across a variety of social factors gives a global snapshot of childrens' status; and there are no surprises here. How well children are doing is distributed unevenly across the United States. Poor child physical and mental health, poor school achievement, and problematic social behaviors fall into familiar social patterns. In general, children in homes characterized by parental joblessness and poverty, low wage work, low education, a high dependency ratio of children to adults in the home, frequent moves, social isolation, and the like—whether in rural or inner city urban settings—are less likely to be doing well compared to children in more advantaged circumstances.<sup>4</sup> It is a truism that the poverty of children's environments endangers their well-being; and this condition is endemic to the lives of children in the United States, as more than one in four children lives below the official poverty level. The negative impacts of poverty are especially critical and long lasting when experienced by children under six.<sup>5</sup>

It is also a truism—and this is important—that broad-view snapshots can be misleading. When we can hold constant one or more variables, such as social class or parental educational status, for instance, and focus on the impact of family structure in conjunction with race or ethnicity, for example, the picture of child well-being changes. Thus, we find that although children from two-parent homes fare better in general than children from homes headed by a single female, this is not the case when analysis is focused on social competence among African American adolescents.<sup>6</sup> Or,

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4. See Gene H. Brody et al., *Family Wages, Family Processes, and Youth Competence in Rural Married African American Families*, in *STRESS, COPING, AND RESILIENCY IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES* 173-88 (Mavis Hetherington & Elaine A. Blechman eds., 1996).

5. See A. Caspi et al., *Early Failure in the Labor Market: Childhood and Adolescent Predictors of Unemployment in the Transition to Adulthood*, 63 *AM. SOC. REV.* 424-51 (1998); Greg J. Duncan et al., *How Much Does Childhood Poverty Affect the Life Chances of Children?*, 63 *AM. SOC. REV.* 406-23 (1998).

6. See D.A. Salem et al., *Effects of Family Structure, Family Process, and Father Involvement on Psychosocial Outcomes Among African American Adolescents*, 47 *FAM. REL.* 331-41 (1998).

as another example, when such family process factors as parental conflict or coparental support strategies are added to analyses of family structure as predictors of adolescent social competence, we find that family processes are more important than family structure.<sup>7</sup>

In short, when the requisite data are available for more complete analyses of children's well-being, the picture becomes far more complex of exactly what impact certain indicators—joint legal custody versus mother sole custody,<sup>8</sup> for instance, or voluntary versus court-ordered compliance of fathers with child support orders,<sup>9</sup> will have on child outcomes and for whom. One of the major developments in this field is the convergence of sophisticated new analytic techniques along with new longitudinal data sets that follow children over time as their personal and family situations change, and utilizing sampling designs that not only are representative of the population as a whole but large enough to allow subgroup analyses by race, ethnicity, family structure, and social status. The result has been an outpouring of very detailed research on child well-being that has raised the bar for high quality, policy relevant research. Certainly in assessing the impact of such events as divorce on children, we have come well beyond the pioneering studies of the small group of middle class, white, suburban California families that served as the database for the Wallerstein and Kelly research.<sup>10</sup>

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7. See Gene H. Brody et al., *Coparenting Processes and Child Competence Among Rural African American Families*, in *FAMILIES, RISK, AND COMPETENCE* 227-43 (Michael Lewis & Candice Feiring eds., 1998); E.A. Vandewater, & J.E. Lansford, *Influences of Family Structure and Parental Conflict on Children's Well-Being*, 47 *FAM. REL.* 323-30 (1998).

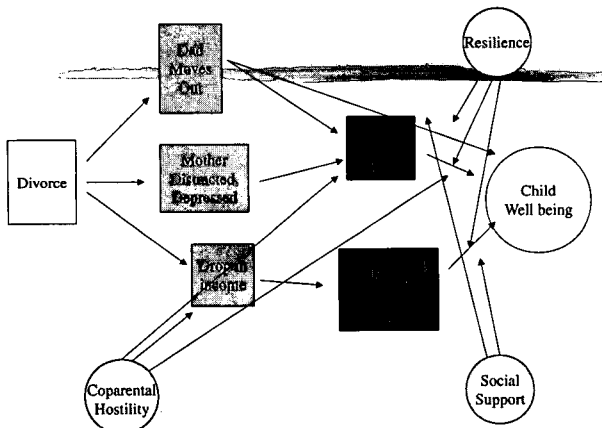
8. See Christine W. Nord, & Nicholas Zill, *Non-Custodial Parents' Participation in Their Children's Lives: Evidence from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)*, Vol. 1. Final report prepared for the Office of Human Services Policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

9. See J. A. Seltzer, *Father by Law: Effects of Joint Legal Custody on Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Children*, 35 *DEMOGRAPHY* 135-46 (1998).

10. See JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN & JOAN B. KELLY, *SURVIVING THE BREAKUP: HOW CHILDREN AND PARENTS COPE WITH DIVORCE* (1980); see also JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN & SANDRA BLAKESLEE, *SECOND CHANCES: MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN AFTER DIVORCE* (1989).

#### D. Risk and Resilience Models

Let me turn to theory for a moment. Driving much of the current research on child well-being, whether conducted by developmental psychologists or social demographers, are risk and resilience models.<sup>11</sup> As the label implies, risk and resilience models focus on pathways of influence leading from potential risks to eventual child outcomes. Rather than assuming that negative outcomes are a foregone conclusion, these models help to identify elements or processes that increase children's vulnerability, on the one hand, and that protect or buffer a child against the harmful impact of potential risks, on the other. Moreover, it is the case that children bring different life histories to any risk condition. Some have prior exposure to adversity and some do not. And those with prior experience may have coped successfully or not with an earlier adverse condition. Resilience refers to the child's capacity for coping effectively or adapting to the negative consequences of risk. It is the outcome of the process of engaging effectively with adversity, a strengthening or tempering process, much as steel is tempered by fire. Children, even those in the same family, vary tremendously in their degree of resilience; moreover, a given child will vary over time in his or her degree of resilience.



**Figure 2. Risk and Resilience Model of Divorce Risk Potential for Child Well-Being**

11. See Philip A. Cowan et al., *Thinking About Risk and Resilience in Families*, in *STRESS, COPING, AND RESILIENCY IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES* 1-38 (Mavis Hetherington & Elaine A. Blechman, eds., 1996).



### E. *Application to Divorce*

Let me apply the risk/resiliency framework to the risk potential of divorce for children. Divorce entails potential risks to child health, academic achievement, and social competence, and it can do so through several mechanisms, each of which is known to disadvantage children. For example, the divorce process may entail the father's move out of the family household, may lead to increased levels of distraction and depression in mothers which compromises her parenting effectiveness, and may involve diminution in economic resources which then can lead to changes in residence, change in neighborhood, and change in school environment.<sup>12</sup> The potential negative impact of divorce through these mechanisms can be amplified by the degree of parental conflict; in other words, coparental hostility increases the vulnerability of children to the risk of negative outcomes from divorce.<sup>13</sup> A potential buffer for the negative outcomes of divorce on children is the active involvement of supportive family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other adults outside the family circle, such as teachers, coaches, and family friends. Adding to the computation of the impact of such a process as divorce on children is the child's own history with adversity and his or her coping capacity. Children who have had experience coping successfully with prior risks have an experiential base that they can draw upon in moving through the process of divorce; they are not invulnerable to the negative consequences of parental divorce; but they are more resilient to its negative impact on their well-being.

Risk and resiliency models are deceptive in their simplicity, as good theoretical models always are. However, they allow for a realistic conceptualization of the many factors and processes operating in a given child's life that can help account for why one child may fare so poorly under circumstances that seem to leave a similarly situated child

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12. See S. J. South et al., *Children's Residential Mobility and Neighborhood Environment Following Parental Divorce and Remarriage*, 77 SOC. FORCES 667-93 (1998).

13. See E. MARK CUMMINGS & PATRICK DAVIES, *CHILDREN AND MARITAL CONFLICT: THE IMPACT OF FAMILY DISPUTE AND RESOLUTION* (1994); Janet R. Johnston et al., *Ongoing Post-Divorce Conflict: Effects on Children of Joint Custody and Frequent Access*, 59 AM. J. ORTHOPSYCHIATRY 576-92 (1989).

relatively unscathed. They also can contribute to the development of more sophisticated and humane legal policy by providing many more points of strategic intervention and manipulation of common legal processes. For example, it is well documented that coparental conflict during the divorce process exacerbates the negative impact of divorce on children. Almost anything that reduces the potential for coparental conflict during divorce would reduce the vulnerability of children to the harmful outcomes of divorce, and thus might be argued is good, child-centered legal policy.

### III. CHANGING CONTEXTS OF FAMILY LIFE

The second area I want to address is the changing context of family life. A thoughtful consideration of child well-being must occur against the backdrop of the following four significant and substantial changes in contemporary U.S. family demography: change in the nature of fatherhood, the growth of multigenerational families, increasing income inequality, and increasing ethnic diversity.

#### A. *Changes in Fatherhood*

Among the patterns most significant for men's father roles is the increasing reliance upon heterosexual cohabitation as a pathway to union formation.<sup>14</sup> Cohabitation patterns in part may account for men's later ages at marriage, which themselves imply that men will spend a relatively shorter period of their lifetimes in a marital/family context.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, more men are coming to fatherhood through a nonmarital pathway, as shown by the increasingly high rates of childbearing outside of normative marital unions among both adolescent and nonadolescent women;<sup>16</sup> fully one-third of infants born in the United States in the 1990s are born to unmarried parents.<sup>17</sup> Despite new state

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14. See Larry L. Bumpass et al., *The Changing Character of Stepfamilies: Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing*, 32 DEMOGRAPHY 425-36 (1995).

15. See D. Eggebeen, & P. Uhlenberg, *Changes in the Organization of Men's Lives: 1960-1980*, 34 FAM. REL. 251-57 (1985).

16. See Elizabeth Thomson et al., *Male Fertility in Relation to Union Formation and Dissolution*. (Background paper prepared for the NICHD Conference on Fathering and Male Fertility: Improving Data and Research. Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Health. March 13-14, (1997)).

17. See SARA MCLANAHAN, & GARY S. SANDEFUR, GROWING UP WITH A

initiatives to establish paternity for every child, children born in nonmarital unions that do not carry the legal responsibilities of marriage are especially vulnerable to fluctuations in men's sense of commitment to their nonlegal offspring.<sup>18</sup>

Among couples who marry there are also some significant continuities and changes that affect men's parenting roles. For example, despite the stabilization of the divorce rate over the past decade, men and women who marry face a continuing high risk of divorce, a pattern of risk which undermines the expectation of marriage as a lifelong commitment that provides a stable and continuous context for rearing one's children to adulthood. And despite recent changes in custody law that abridge automatic presumptions of women's greater suitability for parenthood, custody award patterns following divorce continue to allocate residential parenting responsibilities overwhelmingly to mothers rather than fathers. Finally, despite an increase in the number of states which give preference to joint custody awards in an attempt to recognize and encourage the continuing involvement of fathers with their children after divorce,<sup>19</sup> there is a very large body of evidence that suggests that many fathers appear to drift inexorably out of the lives of their children following divorce.<sup>20</sup>

Pooling all these shifts, Hernandez estimated that more

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SINGLE PARENT: WHAT HURTS, WHAT HELPS (1994).

18. See S.K. Danziger, & N. Radin, *Absent Does Not Equal Uninvolved: Predictors of Fathering in Teen Mother Families*, 52 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 636-42 (1990); Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. & K.M. Harris, *When Fathers Matter/Why Fathers Matter: The Impact of Paternal Involvement on the Offspring of Adolescent Mothers, in THE POLITICS OF PREGNANCY, ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY, AND PUBLIC POLICY* 189-215 (1993); Anu Rangarajan, & P. Gleason, *Young Unwed Fathers of AFDC Children: Do They Provide Support?*, 35 DEMOGRAPHY, 175-86 (1998).

19. See C. Buehler, & J. Gerard, *Divorce Law in the United States: a Focus on Custody*, 44 FAM. REL. 439-58 (1995).

20. See TERRY ARENDELL, *FATHERS AND DIVORCE* (1995); E. G. Cooksey et al., *Parenting from a Distance: The Effects of Paternal Characteristics on Contact Between Nonresidential Fathers and their Children*, 35 DEMOGRAPHY 187-200 (1997); Greer L. Fox, & P.W. Blanton, *Noncustodial Fathers Following Divorce*, 20 MARRIAGE & FAM. REV. 257-82 (1995); J. A. Seltzer, *Relationships Between Fathers and Children Who Live Apart: The Father's Role after Separation*, 53 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 79-101 (1991); J. A. Seltzer, *Father by Law: Effects of Joint Legal Custody on Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Children*, 35 DEMOGRAPHY, 135-46 (1998).

than one third of all children in the United States lived apart from their fathers in 1990.<sup>21</sup> These sociodemographic and legal patterns reflect a structural fragility or vulnerability of men's connections with their children and pose a *prima facie* risk to child well-being.

### B. *Increasing Reliance Upon Multigenerational Families*

Although still a mere blip on the demographic horizon, multigenerational families are increasingly common as sites for familial caretaking.<sup>22</sup> We find an increasing number of children cared for in homes in which the head is a grandparent,<sup>23</sup> more of the very elderly cared for in the homes of elderly adult children, and more three and four generation families living under one roof. Rather than a source of pathology and dysfunction, multigenerational families are, and have always been, a resource for family members in time of need, and a source of economic and social support that is turned to more readily and more often than other sources of formal or informal support.<sup>24</sup> This pattern will only be strengthened by the other three trends in family demography discussed above. It is notable that the flows of support, especially economic and material, are heavily weighted toward distributions from the mature adult generations to those of their children and grandchildren. Families in the United States are increasingly turning to their larger family network as a fallback resource for the care and well-being of children and other dependent family members.<sup>25</sup>

### C. *Increasing Income Inequality*

Income inequality has been somewhat overstated in general discourse; in fact, the year-to-year trends suggest

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21. DONALD J. HERNANDEZ, *AMERICA'S CHILDREN: RESOURCES FROM FAMILY, GOVERNMENT, AND THE ECONOMY* (1993).

22. See Vern Bengston, *Beyond the Nuclear Family: On the Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Relationships*, Address Before the National Council on Family Relations Annual Meeting.

23. See N. Baydar, & Jeanne Brooks Gunn, *Profiles of Grandmothers Who Help Care for Their Grandchildren in the United States*, 47 *FAM. REL.* 385-93 (1998).

24. See A.G. Hunter et al., *Parenting Alone to Multiple Caregivers: Child Care and Parenting Arrangements in Black and White Urban Families*, 47 *FAM. REL.* 343-53 (1998).

25. See *id.*

that the drift toward greater inequality in earned income, while real, is only slight indeed.<sup>26</sup> When the focus is shifted, however, to other measures of economic well-being, such as net worth or wealth accumulation, it is clear that there is increasing disparity in the economic fortunes of Americans.<sup>27</sup> Some have consolidated substantial fortunes over several generations, many have generated mass wealth in their own lifetimes, some, especially middle class peoples of color, start the climb up the economic ladder anew with each succeeding generation, and many struggle to gain or keep their precarious foothold in the economy. As mentioned earlier, children who necessarily share the economic vulnerabilities of their parents are counted among the poorest segment of the population.<sup>28</sup> There is surprisingly widespread tolerance of this extent of poverty among American children. To the extent that poverty populations have become marginalized and demonized in discourse and policy, then so too have the children in this economic segment.

#### D. *Increasing Ethnic Diversity*

Changes in immigration policy in 1965 fostered a new era in the nature and composition of U.S. population growth, changes that are just beginning to be felt in the general populace. Specifically, the spurt in immigration from Asian nations in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s has combined with the increasing flows of immigration from Mexico, Central and South America throughout the 1980s and 1990s to alter substantially the ethnic composition of the U.S. population. Given differential fertility rates by ethnicity, it is reasonable to expect that the ethnic heterogeneity of the school age population (eighteen and younger) will be consistently greater than that of other age groups. This implies that it is among children that the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation will be played out most often both in their own homes and in school settings. Throughout U.S. history it has been a peculiar and quintessentially American quirk to vary in our acceptance of

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26. See Report of the U.S. Census Bureau, 1997.

27. See William P. O'Hare, *A New Look at Poverty in America*, 51 POPULATION BULL. 2, 1-49 (1996).

28. See Greg J. Duncan et al., *How Much Does Childhood Poverty Affect the Life Chances of Children?*, 63 AM. SOC. REV. 406-23 (1998).

people from distinct cultures; currently the United States appears to be lurching between policies of multicultural acceptance and respect and policies that penalize newcomers for being new (and, one suspects, racially or culturally distinct from the mainstream). The variability in political attitudes toward immigrants is relevant to children's interests and well-being, because the tolerance of poverty and lessened life chances for children in general may well be amplified when applied to the children of recent immigrants.

#### IV. CHILD-CENTERED SOCIAL POLICY

I will be very brief in speaking of the wisdom of a child-centered social policy within the context of a family-centered social paradigm. The perspective of family sociology is useful in considering the wisdom of a tilt toward child-centered social policies at the expense of family-based policies. Recall that the essential functional role of the family institution within a society is quite simple—it is the unequivocal assignment of responsibility for the well-being of dependent young. Even today, in the contemporary U.S., families of all descriptions take on this responsibility with amazing competence, efficiency, and good grace; and they do so with a surprising lack of resistance, given the many alternative and arguably more attractive investment opportunities for their limited resources of time, money, and energy.

Does it ever serve children's interests to consider them apart from their families? Certainly it does in some instances over the short run, as in cases of severe child maltreatment; in such cases, it is an open question whether the application of sufficient resources to a given child's family of origin would ever bring such desperately challenged families to the point of parental competence.<sup>29</sup> There may well be other ways to meet the developmental needs of the children in such families and to reduce their vulnerability to harm.<sup>30</sup>

But in the long run, for the vast majority of children, does it serve their interests to consider them apart from their

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29. See Marianne Berry, *The Relative Effectiveness of Family Preservation Services with Neglectful Families*, in *ADVANCING FAMILY PRESERVATION PRACTICE*, 70-98 (E. Susan Morton & R. Kevin Grigsby eds., 1993).

30. See R. Kevin Grigsby, *Theories that Guide Intensive Family Preservation Services: A Second Look*, in *ADVANCING FAMILY PRESERVATION PRACTICE*, 16-27 (E. Susan Morton & R. Kevin Grigsby eds., 1996).

families? I think not. What other institutional contexts do or would serve children's interests in lieu of, or better than, their families? What institutional fallbacks to families are available in this society? What settings have we generated that could meet the test of minimal conditions for the development of social competence in a child as readily and as willingly, as the child's family? What institutions have as much vested interest in the well-being of a particular child as that child's family?

That there are other societies that have developed alternatives to family contexts for child development is not the point. The point is that in this society we have not. We have not come close to the construction of social contexts for child well-being that serve so many so well as do families. That there may be bases other than biology for defining familial connection is also not the point. The point is that families at bottom must represent the unequivocal assignment of responsibility from one human being to another, with sufficient sociocultural undergirding of that assignment as to ensure with a high probability that the assignment will be accepted and carried out most of the time by most of the people. To the extent that a child-centered family law jurisprudence further erodes the cultural underpinnings of family units, then to that extent such a shift in the long run is likely to undermine, rather than enhance, child well-being.

#### V. THE POEM: THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

In closing, let me share with you a poem of Robert Hayden, whom some of you may recognize as the first African American U.S. poet laureate. I do so not only because of its beauty, but also because of its humility in reminding us how easy it is to misread the actions of parents, and fail to find there the unselfish service of parents in the interests of children.

#### *Those Winter Sundays*

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house.  
Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?<sup>31</sup>

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31. Robert Hayden, 1913-1980.



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