

MARRIED FATHERHOOD: CAN WE TALK ABOUT IT?

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My goal: to generate a conversation, not to provide the answers

- 1. The demographic shift away from married fatherhood in the 1960s.**
 - Married fatherhood was the norm in all cultures and throughout history.
 - Nonmarried birth rate now 40 percent, used to be 10 percent in 1970.
 - Divorce rate 50%, doubled from late 1960s.

- 2. How American men and women form and dissolve unions involving children**
 - **Andrew Cherlin: *The Marriage go Round; the new landscape of family instability for children.***

Compared to Europe, we don't maintain couple bonds when we have children. European cohabiting couples with children are more stable than American married couples. Our cohabiting couples are quite unstable, as are our marriages.
 - Recent research on the effects of multiple transitions on children.
 - Recent research on multiple partner fertility: first class and other classes of children in a family depending on their father's involvement and how the mother feels about the various fathers

- 3. Gender mistrust—what we have to deal with this in the fatherhood area**
 - Especially in low income communities, and increasingly in working class communities, gender mistrust is prominent.
 - Linda Burton's research has documented that over 90% of low income single mothers have high levels of mistrust of men, even though most are in intimate relationships with men.
 - Men also mistrust women: research showing that women initiate most of the break ups. Divorced men are more apt to long for a reunion.

- 4. Marriage as a value for our children and society**
 - Research shows that most Americans of all social classes and races value marriage and aspire to it as a place for themselves and their children. But we have trouble talking about it with unmarried fathers and mothers.

- In the Citizen Father Project (at the FATHER Project) with successful, leader noncustodial fathers, we asked: “When’s the best time to become a father? The answer included “being with one woman, married and stable.” But we never dug deeper into this answer—it’s a hard conversation to have.

5. Why do we avoid talking about married fatherhood?

- Most of the men we work with have broken up with the mother and have little prospect of being a couple with her again, let alone married.
- Many have children with more than one woman: which one would they marry?
- Many don’t have the economic and life stability that would seem to qualify them for marriage.
- Many lack the interpersonal skills needed for a stable relationship
- Many are ambivalent about being faithful to one woman
- Many see marriage as a form of control: husband = “ball and chain.”
- Some mistrust women in general.

6. A proposal to begin the conversation in community

- Frame a future ideal: what kind of relationship with a woman would be best for having more children in the future?
- Let’s talk about what it takes for a man to have that kind of relationship with a woman, for example, trustworthiness, commitment, work ethic in a job.
- Focus on questions and deliberation, neither lecturing nor retreating from the issue. Questions we can ask:
 - What’s the ideal relationship between the mother and father for a child to be raised in?
 - Responses will start with qualities such as supportiveness; then ask the harder questions about whether the couple relationship should be intimate, permanent, and in the same home—and whether this is basically what we call a good marriage?
 - How far are we from that ideal in this community?
 - What are the barriers to that ideal?
 - What would it take to overcome those barriers for this generation and our children’s generation? Who would have to be involved in surmounting the barriers?
- Ask these questions in many settings and share the responses with other groups.
- Look for leaders who want to carry the conversation into action in their own lives and in the community.
- Women will have to be partners in these conversations.
- Here’s a bold idea: citizen fathers and citizen mothers looking at marriage as a community value.