

Why Families Do or Do Not Breakdown

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Abstract The authors present research-based evidence indicating why it is that certain families do or do not breakdown. The authors divide the factors into four distinct categories, based on the four combinations of two sets of factors, i.e., whether the factors are internal or external to the family and whether it has a positive or negative influence on the overall spiritual and psychological health of the family. The chapter is designed to strengthen families, due to an enhanced awareness of the forces at work both inside and outside the family that can serve to influence its members.

Keywords Family · Marriage · Divorce · Christianity · Prayer · Devotions · Bible · Children · Priorities · Wisdom · Example · Favoritism · Rivalry · Parenting · Counseling

It is beyond dispute that one of the most ostensible trends of the last 50 years is that the family in the United States, Europe, and much of the world has broken down to a large degree (Amato 2001; Brooks and Goldstein 2001; Chadwick and Heaton 1992; Glasser and Glasser 1996; Jacobsen et al. 2012). After declining from the 1948–1962 period, parental divorce rates surged beginning in 1963 (Becker 1981; Cherlin 1978; Fine and Harvey 2006). The research literature is inundated with the illimitable number of sobering results of the breakdown of the family, particularly on children but also on the adults involved (Allen and Atkins 2012; Bouchard and Doucet 2011; Lee and Bowen 2006). Among the children of these families, some

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of these effects include declining achievement in school, increased incidence of depression and other examples of psychological duress, elevated likelihood of partaking in illegal drugs, and the greater likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior (Fine and Harvey 2006; Lamb 1997; Pong et al. 2003).

Sadly, the trend toward the break-up of the family did not end with the rising incidence of divorce, nor did it cease with the rising incidence of remarriage (Glasser and Glasser 1996; Jeynes 2006c). Rather, non-traditional family structures continued to proliferate so that never married single parent families and cohabitation surged (Guner and Knowles 2009; Palm and Fagan 2008). As time passed into the 1990s and 2000s households in which neither parent was present, although relatively small in number, increased in their incidence (Glasser and Glasser 1996; Post 2000).

There may be situations in which family breakup is unavoidable or at least understandable. Prior to the 1960s, when there was only one parent in the home often people thought that perhaps either the father or mother died (Lamb 1997; Popenoe 2000). There are also situations in which one of the marital partners commits adultery (Allen and Atkins 2012; Clayton et al. 2013). Nevertheless, there are also a plethora of cases in which the breakup of a family is viewed as unnecessary, harmful, and damaging either to couple involved, their children, and even to society at large (Nair and Murray 2005; Wallerstein 2005). There are, of course, going to be differences in the degree to which certain view particular breakups as necessary or unnecessary and the extent of the damage that is done (Glasser and Glasser 1996; Lamb 1997; Post 2000). A copious number of these differences are due to a variety of worldviews that people possess that run along the perimeter of a combination of religious beliefs, core convictions, and personal experiences (Allen and Atkins 2012; Stokes and Ellison 2010). In the midst of these dearly valued worldviews, there runs a thread of common values that are logical enough and involve common principles of decency that would lead the overwhelmingly majority of Americans and other nationalities to the conclusion that the marriage could have been saved (Weiner-Davis 2001; Popenoe 2000; Post 2000; Rein 2007). The news media daily presents stories on family dysfunction, with the understanding that the facts that they present will lead 90% of the television audience to reach the same conclusion (Guner and Knowles 2009; McDonald and Robinson 2009).

With this background in mind, it is indubitably true that virtually all Americans concur that family break-ups should be reduced (Jeynes 1999; Post 2000). Moreover, if one were to ask virtually members of any family in the United States whether their ideal goal would be to breakup or remain together, the response would be in favor of remaining together (McLanahan et al. 2013). The issue of family harmony and togetherness impacts the vast majority of people in the world in one-way or another. This chapter could deal with few more relevant and timely topics than this one.

It is naturally easy to be critical of couples that divorce (Jeynes 2002b). At times, that criticism may be well deserved (Wallerstein 2005). Be that as it may, often individuals are quick to disparage couples who breakup in the aftermath of that divorce,

but do not show as much alacrity in addressing the copious number of factors that together increase a society's proclivity toward family dissolution (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Only part of the solution to alleviating the high rates of divorce rests in passing laws to make divorce more difficult to initiate or complete (Stokes and Ellison 2010; Wallerstein 2005; Wallerstein and Lewis 1998). In order to have a much more efficacious impact, one must fathom some of the forces at work that increase the likelihood of family breakup. And indeed there are a host of factors, which fall under certain categories that are best conceptualized as internal and external factors. Utilizing the knowledge of these factors will not only help people adopt a strategy that will help strengthen families nationwide, but first and foremost will enable people to strengthen their own families and serve as a buttress for the marriages of those that they love. They can also be useful principles to apply in the inner city, where family dissolution is often so common (Jeynes 2003; Williams and Sanchez 2012, 2013).

Internal Factors

Positive

Marriage has many forces working on the couple to either draw the family closer or further apart. The internal factors are usually the most important ones because: (1) clearly families are almost always able to improve internal factors much more expeditiously and completely than they can the external factors; (2) external factors rarely reach levels that even approach near perfection, i.e., the environment that most families operate in is far from ideal; and (3) internal factors are more likely to have a prodigious and long-lasting impact on the family (Hayes 2011; Heaven et al. 2010; McLanahan et al. 2013; Jeynes 2005c, 2012c).

With this context in mind, it is vital that those people who are pro-family realize that much more can be accomplished they focus on the steps that families can take to increase the strength of their marriages rather than overly criticizing those who are filing for divorce (Markman et al. 2010; Post 2000; Worthington 2000). There is a place for holding responsible those who take marital agreements far too lightly than they should (Glasser and Glasser 1996; Ingram 2009; Wallerstein 2005). The research evidence is so patent on this issue that one cannot reasonably gainsay the fact that millions of Americans do not take their marital commitments seriously enough (Clinton and Ohischlager 2002; Clayton et al. 2013; Glasser and Glasser 1996; Shin et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the best times to express one's views on this subject are during the pre-marital phase, in the early days of the marriage, and well before a couple decides to break-up (Post 2000; Worthington 2000; Wright and Roberts 1997). Any efforts to preserve marriage are feeble indeed if they are only explicated when a marital breakup has occurred.

A Strong Family Begins with Right Priorities and Spending Time with The Family

For family harmony and bonding to be at its strongest, the priorities of each family member of the family should be God first, followed by the family, and everything else afterwards (Jeynes 2006a, 2010b). If these priorities are real and are seriously applied, they will be reflected in the degree to which members of the family desire to- and actually- spend time with one another (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). When I first became a Christian, I did not have to ask the believers that lived around me whether they loved me or not. They desired to spend an incredible amount of time with me. That was my evidence. I must confess, my priorities of God, family, friends, and then ministry represent the essence of who I am. Due to these priorities I turned down my first invitation to speak at the White House in order to ensure that we could obtain a visa for one of our children, Elisha, to join us for a ministry trip in Brazil. At the time, Brazil was one of the hardest nations to obtain a visa for minors. I had gone down to the Brazilian Consulate in Los Angeles 4 times and my wife had journeyed there once to secure our son's visa, but there had been no success. We really believed that going on trip to Brazil would change Elisha's life and it did. That is where he engaged in music ministry with other believers for the first time. I also turned down an incredible opportunity to speak in Iran, that was extended to me, largely because of an interview I did with *Aljazeera* on Christian revival in Asia that received a great deal of attention and favorable responses, including over 2800 "likes" at the *Aljazeera* website, which in an Islamic environment is rather amazing. They wanted me to come, when one of our children graduated from college. I have also taken dozens of days off from work to help my children with their homework. Family comes first.

Right priorities are salient along more than one dimension. Not only is it true that each member of the home should have the priorities of God, family, and then everything else. It is also vital that each person in the home have the right priorities in terms of the character traits that are most important in life. Biblically speaking, it is quite clear just what those traits are (Clinton and Ohischlager 2002; Montague 2011). Jesus Christ declared that the two most important qualities a person could have are love of God and love of neighbor (Holy Bible, NIV, Luke 10:27). He also declared that the greatest person in the Kingdom of God was someone who was humble (Holy Bible, NIV, Matthew 18: 3, 4). It would seem, therefore, that the three most important traits that a person can have are love of God, love of neighbor, and humility (Jeynes 2009a). In order for home-life to be spiritual, it needs to have love at its core. In addition, love and humility are never so beautifully blended as when they are inextricably harmonized in a spirit of forgiveness. That is in many ways what happened via Christ at the cross. The presence of forgiveness is necessary for any marriage to work. If a family member's foremost priorities are other qualities that are not as important this can eventually cause fundamental problems in a marriage and in family living (Clinton and Ohischlager 2002; Post 2000). For example, if a person values diligence, self-discipline, and mental toughness, these are all fine characteristics to possess. However, they should not enjoy the primacy that love and humility have. Therefore, if a person emphasizes these other traits more than

love and humility, that individual may become highly successful, reach impressive heights of notoriety, and be able to handle life's stresses. However, that person may not be able to have a very serene and blissful home-life unless one has a very understanding spouse. Most marriages, especially, and families will thrive insofar as love reigns in the hearts of everyone in the household. Clearly, there are other factors that affect the quality of a marriage that go well beyond the realm of love and humility (Montague 2011; Post 2000). These forces may include financial pressures, health challenges, in-law problems, and so forth. In fact, many of these forces are external to the marriage and vary in the degree to which family members have much control over them (McDonald and McDonald 1994; Worthington 2000).

Although all of what has been shared above sounds wonderful in the ideal world, the reality is that the direction that the family goes in is often determined by the "weakest link" in the household (Post 2000; Rehm and Rehm 2002). That is, the member of the family that is least committed to a given home unit will often determine the ambience that exists in the household (Ingram 2009; Post 2000; Worthington 2000). This is why it is important for all members of the family to be oriented toward love.

Having Regular Family Devotions

It is wise to have regular family devotions. There is that old adage that states, "The family that prays together stays together." In practice, many families truly no longer know what that phrase means. Family devotions provide a wonderful opportunity to study the Bible together, pray for one another's needs, sing spiritual songs together, and encourage one another in the midst of life's blessings and trials. It is not always easy to have high quality sharing time as a family, but a family devotional time provides an opportunity to bond via sharing that few activities can rival (Jeynes 2006a; Post 2000). If at all possible, these devotionals should take place every day that the family is not going to church.

Family devotions create an atmosphere and of love and support in the family. In addition, there is the opportunity to teach the children the importance of praying specifically. They can even encourage higher rates of literacy and academic achievement among one's children (Jeynes 2010c, 2012c; Jeynes and Littell 2000). Research indicates that reading the Bible is associated with higher academic achievement (Jeynes 2010c, 2012a; Nord 2010). In fact, the difference between the average GPA of students with high Bible literacy versus those with low Bible literacy rates can be as much as the difference between an A- and C+ (Jeynes 2009b). Probably a large degree of this effect is due to the fact that if one is to understand much of American and world history, as well as literature, a working knowledge of the Bible is quite essential (Prothero 2007).

There is a fundamental strengthening that takes place in an individual, when a Bible devotional is done daily and the same principle certainly holds for the family as well (Dallman 2007; Post 2000; Worthington 2000). If they are done with discipline good thoughts become actions and actions if done consistently enough become habits. If the habits are filled with love and acceptance, what results is godly character (Dallman 2007; Montague 2011; Novak 2005).

Make Studying and Memorizing the Bible a Family Priority

The Bible serves as a moral compass to help shape family life. To the extent that godly behavior thrives in a household, family life will tend to be strengthened. The extent to which a person is committed to living out the exhortations of the Bible regarding kindness, gentleness, and upright behavior, the more likely it is that the husband, wife, and children will feel loved, valued, and appreciated (Jeynes 2009a, 2009b). As a result, it is wise to encourage a diligent and consistent study of the Bible as a means to this end. Simply attending church in order to receive one's spiritual nourishment gives one only a cursory exposure to the Scripture. Therefore, the parents should encourage the family to have morning devotionals in order to be affected by these spiritual truths every day. In addition, the members of the family should dedicate themselves to the memorization of the Bible in order to internalize many of the spiritual exhortations of the Scripture (Jeynes 2010c). Engaging in this practice will enhance the likelihood of peace, love, joy, kindness, and gentleness existing in a household.

The practice of studying the Bible and praying in the form of a personal devotional time is probably best done in the morning, because it serves as a foundation for the remainder of the day. In addition, by initiating this practice at the beginning of each day, a person is making a statement about the importance one places of personal behavior, attitudes, relationships, and particularly the family. Family devotionals are good to have at the end of the day, when everyone is home. This practice serves to draw the family closer to God and to one another (Dallman 2007).

Synchronize with What is Going on in Church and School

Communication is the lifeblood of any relationship and it is absolutely essential that parents be aware of what is going on in the church and the school and be active participants in each (Arnold 2007; Borrueal 2002; Jeynes 2011b). This truism also applies to all relationships that exist within the home (Hayes 2011; Jeynes 2005a, 2005c; Williams and Sanchez 2012). Parents who have experienced raising teenagers are among the first to recognize the importance of this aspect of family living. The reality is that a myriad of the teenagers in the home are frequently uncommunicative and this fact makes synchronizing with youth activities in the church and school challenging (Kennedy 2001; Post 2000).

The synchronization via family communication, especially designed to enhance one's relationship with the children, must be ameliorative to the family's dynamics in that it needs to be supportive, free-flowing, and helpful. This is not an easy goal to accomplish, especially when parents are raising teens. If all the family members progressed through life with a plenteous amount of objectivity and compassion, accomplishing these three goals might not be as difficult as it sometimes is. However, adolescents are not usually known for their objectivity and compassion

and can become defensive if adults ask them too many questions (Evertson and Emmer 2009; Williams and Sanchez 2012). It takes a certain degree of patience and creativity by the parents to create an ambience of the kind of productive communication between adults and their children that strengthen family bonds rather than weakens them. The patience that is most beneficial in these situations is one that is rooted in love (Jeynes 2002a, 2006b). In other words, the key to patience is not to declare, “Give me patience and give it now!” but rather to seek to love the individual the way that God does. Patience goes considerably farther when it is founded on love than when it is not (Jeynes 2009a).

When the parents attempt to synchronize their hearts and minds with the churches and schools, it helps their children feel more grounded in the home and the community and gives these youngsters a greater sense of belonging. Nevertheless, accomplishing this requires a good deal of communication with the children, the church, and the school (Jeynes 2005b, 2007a, 2007b). Another advantage of this synchronization is that the parents become more aware of the spiritual and academic progress of their young (Jeynes 2002c, 2003, 2011a). It is wise for parents to establish strong bonds of mutual respect and communication with the ministers, Sunday school leaders, and teachers (Jeynes 2000).

Talk About Vocations for the Children

One of the most dramatic results of being a person of faith is that one believes that God has a purpose for his or her life. The fact is naturally true not only for adult Christians, but also for young children and adolescents as well. It is very important that parents convey these truths to children (Kennedy 2001). Young people are in the midst of trying to define who they are, they are developing their self-concept, and attempting to discern God’s purposes for their lives (Baehr 1998; Kennedy 2001). It is therefore vital that parents communicate with their children about God’s will for their lives. This naturally includes a broad list of topics including God’s will for people’s lives generally, e.g., to be loving, honest, respectful, responsible, compassionate, and godly. Nevertheless, it also encompasses very specific issues such as comprehending the place of one’s gifts and talents in the context of God’s calling on one’s life. Drawing these qualities together into a coherent whole is clearly typically more facile for an adult than it is for a youth. Therefore, it is especially important for mothers and fathers to help their children understand how all these factors interact in a way that helps them discern what type of career is best for them. This certainly does not mean that the parents should make the occupational decision for the children. To the contrary, deliberations regarding such paths as college and other occupationally-related conclusions should be largely up to the youth. These are some of the most important foundational decisions children will ever make and they should be consistent with the overall leanings of their own mind and heart. Within this context, however, it is helpful to offer parental input and wisdom.

Negative

Favoritism is a Terror

In the Bible it is clearly taught that God's essence is love. In I John 4:8 it is declared that, "God is love." Moreover, in Romans 2:11 it is declared that, "God shows no partiality." One of the most famous Bible accounts is in the Old Testament, regarding the favoritism that Jacob showed Joseph over his other sons. This proclivity for Jacob to show Joseph more loving affection than Jacob's other children almost led to Joseph's death and played a large role in Joseph's eventual selling into slavery (Jeynes 2006a).

Favoritism can cause unnecessary tension within a family. The word "unnecessary" is especially worthy of note because some challenges in life are difficult and at times even impossible to eschew. In other words, life will always have a certain degree of stress. Given that life often offers situations that are rife with stress, one would certainly not want to unnecessarily add to the list of stressors. One of the first places to do that is favoritism. This is not as easy as one might think, because one's children will *perceive* favoritism different than the parents do. Most notably, some of one's children will follow the rules of the home with greater alacrity than others. Some children will perceive that the obedient children are treated with greater trust than the others. In reality, however, in establishing the same rules for all of their children the parents are actually being very fair. Therefore, in order to parent in a way that is extricated from even the least traces of favoritism, the father and mother must know their own hearts and know them well. Perceived favoritism is quite different from actual favoritism and it is important for parents to realize that children will often be ultra sensitive to any indication of favoritism. And given that human beings, especially children, have a real propensity to feel sorry for themselves, youngsters will almost always perceive themselves as being on the lower part of the totem poll when it comes to perceived parental favoritism. Because of the capricious nature of people's perceived favoritism, it is key that people have the self-knowledge to have an accurate perception of their own heart in terms of being fair in the raising of their children (Levitt et al. 2001).

Rivalry is Serious

Virtually everyone has heard of the term "sibling rivalry." In fact, numerous people have heard of the term so many times that they can easily become anesthetized to its potentially nefarious potential (Goldenthal 1999; Levitt et al. 2001). The reality is that people are born as individuals, i.e., single human units. Whether one operates out of a secular rubric of "survival of the fittest" and "self-preservation" or one of believing that humans have a divine orientation, but concurrently also have a self-centered one, few who have lived on earth for any length of time would gainsay that human beings often behave in very self-serving ways. Young people have an

unmistakable propensity to be insecure, as they attempt to define themselves in the midst of the larger world in which they live (Goldenthal 1999; Levitt et al. 2001). Given that youth, of virtually all ages, tend to be insecure in one way or another, they tend to evaluate themselves in comparison to others among their peers (Goldenthal 1999; Levitt et al. 2001). This begins in the home and the genesis of such tendencies usually begins in comparing oneself to one's siblings.

For the vast majority of young in the world, their first exposure to love comes from their parents. There are few experiences in life that are more fulfilling and generate such positive results as feeling loved (Jeynes 2006b, 2011, 2012c). Consequently, it is not unusual for children to seek to outdo their siblings in one activity or another, so that they can "earn" a greater degree of love from their parents (Kennedy 2001; Levitt et al. 2001). While such an orientation among youth is both understandable and normal, it is potentially dangerous both to oneself and at an interpersonal level. There are a plethora of disadvantages to engaging in this kind of rivalry, just some of which are listed here. They include:

1. Being defined in value based on personal perceptions entrenched in comparisons and not in reality in terms of one's worth in its own right.
2. Living a life that is focused on the acceptance of others rather than doing what is right and applying an "other orientation" that focuses on helping others become all that they can be.
3. Pursuing an existence that is concerned almost totally about one's own pursuits and successes rather than also rejoicing in the victories that others experience, especially among those that are closest.
4. Spending one's time trying to prove oneself rather than simply trying to be oneself.
5. Comparing oneself to others is generally a losing proposition because a person emphasizes his or her own inadequacies.

Parents clearly cannot always prevent such rivalries from emerging, but what they can do is recognize the potential perils of such competition and do what they can to prevent them from burgeoning.

When no One is Home After School

Communication is the lifeblood of any relationship and in no arena is this more patent than in the home (Cowan et al. 2009; Jeynes 2010d; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009). To whatever extent dialog does not exist whether it be through the married couple or between the parents and their children, the quality of family life will tend to suffer. In recent years, some psychologists, family scientists, and sociologists have placed an emphasis on "quality time" as opposed to the actual amount of time (Altschul 2011; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Granted, there is clearly some truth to this emphasis. There is no question that there is a difference between time together spent in intimate and transparent interaction as opposed to being silent at the dinner table. Having stated this, however, research does indeed

support the notion that the quantity of time that family members spend together has a measurable impact on a host of outcomes, including psychological wellbeing, academic achievement, overall happiness, personal productivity, job performance and satisfaction, etc. (Dichele 2006; Frech and Kimbro 2011; Hognas and Carlson 2010; Jeynes 2010a, 2010b).

The reality of life is that getting to know one another takes time. In many respects there are really no shortcuts. Therefore, while there is clearly a sense in which there are high “quality time” activities, people would be wise to realize that sometimes children do not want or benefit the most simply from activities that involve high “quality time.” These activities certainly have their place. Nevertheless, one would be wise to ascertain a salient truth: High quality time generally does not replace missed time. The presence of an individual and the time-invested by being present is generally so greatly valued by human beings, that it often cannot be replicated. For example, if my wife and I have planned on 3 h of being together in an evening, I cherish every moment that I spend with my wife to such a degree that if she calls and says that she will be late and can only spend 1½ h with me, but that it will be high “quality time,” I am usually quite disappointed. I enjoy just having my wife in the same room. We enjoy just holding hands. Although we enjoy the high quality times, we cherish every moment together. Therefore the word “time” is very important to us, whether it is high quality or not.

It is also true that research is quite consistent in demonstrating that on average children raised in two biological parent families accrue certain benefits to a greater degree than children raised in single parent families (Wallerstein 2005). These benefits include better academic achievement, sense of wellbeing, psychological balance, and so forth than their counterparts in single parent households (Wallerstein and Lewis 1998). There are many single parents who are able to spend quite a bit of time with their children. Nevertheless, there is no question that it is easier for two parents collaborating together to make sure that children are not alone at home without parental supervision than it is for one parent to do the same. This is especially true when one considers that often single parents must go out and work in order to support the family. Consequently, research indicates that “latch key” children are far more likely to live in a home with a single parent than they are in a two biological parent home (McLanahan et al. 2013; Wallerstein 2005; Wallerstein and Lewis 1998).

When Children Don’t See the Parents Praying

Academic research often confirms common sense and the idea that actions speak louder than words is one example of this fact. The Bible and various pieces of Christian literature throughout time testify to the importance of setting an example (Holy Bible, I Corinthians 11:1). Parents can discuss about the importance of praying and studying the Bible all that they want, but it is the example they set that really impacts their children the most. If mothers and fathers want their children to enhance the depth of their relationship with God, then the parents themselves need



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-13301-0>

Ministering Spiritually to Families

Jeynes, W.; Martinez, E. (Eds.)

2015, XVIII, 212 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-13301-0