



INSTITUTE OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY CANADA CONFERENCE

On Thursday, May 5, 2011, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada hosted their annual day-long policy conference. Highly qualified speakers from around the world spoke to issues facing the family in Canada today. Below please find four reports, summarizing each speaker, by Catherine Benesch, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada researcher.

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW PICTURES FROM THE EVENT](#)

[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO AUDIO FILES OF THE VARIOUS SPEAKERS](#) (Video files are forthcoming.)

DR. MARK REGNERUS ON MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Maybe it's Mom and Dad saying wait until you're financially secure to tie the knot – or maybe young adults crave the freedom and independence that comes with being single.

Mark Regnerus, PhD, says "cultural stories about marriage," coupled with the sexual choices of adults ages 18 to 23, keep them from getting married and are resulting in declining fertility rates.

Dr. Regnerus cites Canada's average age of marriage at 30 for men and 29 for women – two and three years higher for men and women respectively than their American counterparts.

One of the most prevalent cultural narratives is that there's no rush to get married, a mentality especially prevalent among men, says Dr. Regnerus. There's also the idea that young adulthood is a time "be your own person" and figure out "who you are." Dating is a way of finding out "what you like," rather than finding a life partner.

According to Dr. Regnerus, young adults receive little support in merging marriage with other life goals and tend to think marriage means giving up career and travel opportunities. "We heard about it even from people who clearly did not have the means to travel," Dr. Regnerus explains. "It's just the idea of it, together with the assumption that marriage nixes travel possibilities (and) means children, work, and a mortgage on the house in the suburbs and the end of all things creative and spontaneous." An irony Dr. Regnerus emphasizes is that marriage may actually expand financial resources and open up possibilities of travel through being able to share expenses with a spouse.

For those young adults pursuing romantic relationships, they're looking for chemistry and engaging in pre-marital sex. But as Dr. Regnerus points out, there's a correlation between having more pre-marital sex partners and lower marriage rates.

"Most sexual relations don't end in cohabitation. They don't end in marriage," Dr. Regnerus says. "They just end."

Declining marriage rates are also impacted by what Dr. Regnerus calls "the low-cost of sex," citing that men of previous generations had to show more commitment and earning power to a potential wife. "What does he have to do to access this thing that he wants?" Dr. Regnerus asks. "Today, not a whole lot."

Dr. Regnerus says the trend points to declining fertility rates and new social realities – one of them being that fewer grandchildren will know their grandparents.

Dr. Mark Regnerus is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of over 30 published articles and book chapters. In addition to his appointment in sociology, Mark is also a faculty research associate of the university's Population Research Center. His recently published book is called Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate and Think About Marrying.

JONAS HIMMELSTRAND ON DAYCARE IN SWEDEN

Too little parents and too much daycare—that's the problem Sweden is facing according to Swedish researcher and author Jonas Himmelstrand.

After a generation of parental disconnect with children over 16 months, the consequences of too much daycare include an escalation of psychological problems like anxiety and depression among Swedish youth.

In the last 25 years, Himmelstrand reports the number of these disorders among girls has tripled, affecting 30 per cent of young females.

Tax subsidies for daycare of the equivalent of CAD\$20,000 annually per child push both parents into the workforce and out of the home. With 92 per cent of Swedish children aged 18 months to five years in day care, Himmelstrand says mothers and fathers are becoming more the “organizer of activities rather than the parents having a relationship with their child.”

That’s translating into behaviour and discipline problems in the classrooms, which in Sweden are among the worst in Europe. Falling grades are rampant. Swedish schools are no longer top-notch, now “merely average,” according to Himmelstrand, with students struggling the most in math. This is ironic, since one of the aims of universal day care was to improve math ability among students.

More children in daycare means the quality is deteriorating and “daycare staff top our sick leave statistics,” Himmelstrand says. Staff often work with a ratio of 17 children to three adults. This compares to some daycares in 1980, where there ratio was 10 children to four adults.

Most daycare workers are women, but the burnout problem reaches across occupations. “If we’d let those women stay at home to be with the children for 10 years, they probably could have worked to 65, maybe even 70. But we’re forcing them to have children and to work at the same time. They’re burnt out by the age of 55.”

Parents looking for options, Himmelstrand says, must reconcile with the reality that “home schooling is, in effect, illegal” and “you have to be prepared to leave the country immediately.”

He home schools his own children and every year goes through a tedious process of applying for permission, being turned down, and appealing those decisions through the courts.

“By the time you get to the highest court, the school year is over, and you start all over again.”

Jonas Himmelstrand has been a consultant in business for over 25 years, focusing on leadership, education and personal development. He is the author of Following Your Heart in the Social Utopia of Sweden (2007) and the founder of the Mireja Institute, which focuses on close relationships as the key to building welfare, development and democracy.

DR. BRAD WILCOX ON GENDER ROLES IN PARENTING

It's what Grandma knew and science now proves, says marriage and cohabitation researcher Brad Wilcox, PhD.

His research shows children do best when Mom and Dad are both around, because each parent brings unique talents to the parenting enterprise. Dr. Wilcox says it's a countercultural and sometimes controversial finding, given the variety of modern family structures.

Dr. Wilcox's work indicates a mother's strengths are in communicating. She understands her children intrinsically, instinctively interpreting tone and context, and is less likely than Dad to forget past conversations.

Her biology –higher levels of estrogen and oxytocin – makes her more nurturing, so when children need a reassuring hug or when they're afraid, she's the one they prefer.

So what do we need Dad for? A lot.

Fathers are motivated by marriage and children to take on more hours at work in response to accepting a greater role as a provider. But while men who are fathers work more than other men, a dad's role in playing with children is also important. "Kids who play more often with their dads ... are better prepared for the game of life," Dr. Wilcox says. Fathers engage in more vigorous, exciting games and play than mothers, and this helps children learn self-control and how to deal with aggression without resorting to violence.

The statistics support the research. Dr. Wilcox reports that boys raised in single parent homes about twice as likely to spend some time in prison and jail before turning 32, controlling for factors like education, income and race. "Boys who do not regularly experience the love, discipline and modeling of a good father are more likely to engage in what we call compensatory masculinity, where they reject and denigrate all that's feminine, and instead seek to prove their masculinity by engaging in ... violent and promiscuous behaviour," Dr. Wilcox says. He added this is not always the case, pointing out he himself was raised by a single mother, but that in the aggregate, the statistics are clear.

The presence of a father also has a significant impact on daughters.

"There's a very strong association between Dad being in the home and a girl having a much lower risk of having a teenage pregnancy," Dr. Wilcox says.

The research shows about five percent of American girls living in intact nuclear families become pregnant as teens. Comparatively, when the father leaves the home between the ages of six and 18, the risk of teenage pregnancy doubles to ten per cent, and if dad leaves before the girl turns six, it increases the risk by seven times to 35 per cent.

Dad in the dynamic also provides a source of challenge for the children to engage in life outside the family, and encourages them to take calculated risks in sports, school and work. Dr. Wilcox explains that fathers balance out mother's more nurturing capacities by pushing children to explore, go farther and learn independence.

Dr. Wilcox points out that a man's most significant role in his family might just be that of loving his wife. When the woman has a loving and supporting husband, she channels that love to the children in a virtuous cycle, with children reciprocating the affection.

Being exposed to loving parental dynamics models respect in relationships. It teaches boys to treat women well. Girls likewise learn to treat men well, while expecting that men should reciprocate by treating them with respect.

Dr. Wilcox is the Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, and a member of the James Madison Society at Princeton University. His research has been featured in The Washington Post, USA Today, The Boston Globe, The Los Angeles Times, CBS News and numerous NPR stations.

GREG FLEMING ON WHAT CANADA CAN LEARN FROM NEW ZEALAND'S APPROACH TO FAMILY POLICY

"In New Zealand, choice trumps consequences," says Greg Fleming, Chief Executive Officer of the Maxim Institute, citing Canada can much to learn from New Zealand, given the similar cultural contexts of the two countries.

Choice over consequences has spurred contentious changes in New Zealand's public policy, including the decriminalization of prostitution and the criminalization of spanking.

Fleming says anecdotal evidence indicates legalizing prostitution has not been for the better. "Seldom does a month go by now without some headline detailing a brothel being found by a school gate or yet another local council wrestling with zoning challenges."

As a warning to Canada, Fleming says: "The understanding of the very nature of prostitution – what it assumes about human sex, choice, power, compassion, relationships and justice – is where the real debate needs to be had. Unfortunately, we seldom got to that ground in New Zealand."

Fleming's second topic centers on the criminalization of parental discipline by spanking. Spanking is now considered a form of abuse, with children seen by the legal system as "mini-adults" that need to be empowered. Restraining a child or having a time-out is considered assault, and there remains no defense for parents who choose these forms of discipline.

Almost a third of parents surveyed say their kids have threatened to report spankings to authorities or teachers. The concern is that parents are losing physical authority over their children.

Fleming says changes in public policy should strengthen families and communities rather than break them down, and it is his hope with a refocusing of policy direction, that in 20 years, Canada can look to New Zealand as a model rather than a warning.

Greg Fleming is the chief executive officer of the Maxim Institute, a public policy think tank with a mission to foster ideas and leadership that enable freedom, justice and compassion to flourish in New Zealand.