

The 'being and doing' side of our behavior

Family well-being in a time of change

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Despite social changes and economic crisis, evidence shows that family bonds remain strong and family members assist one another through financial support and care. In both developed and developing countries, older people, especially the younger-old, are more likely to provide financial support to younger family members than they are to receive it, even though there may be a perception that younger generations are faced with the burden of taking care of the older ones. But what are the tools to measure the effectiveness of government policies in promoting the totality of family well-being?

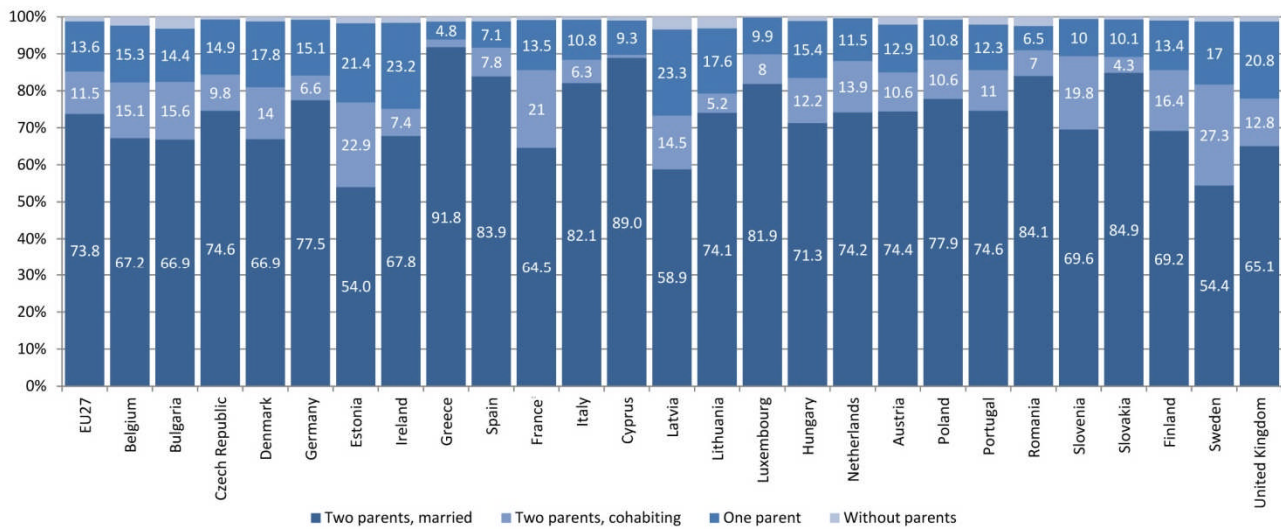
Living in relative poverty has been considered to determine many aspects of family well-being. Yet, while family income is undoubtedly important, by itself it does not offer sufficient insight into how some families appear to cope well with their circumstances and others continue to struggle.

Besides, eliminating a single risk factor or promoting just one that is protective may not go far enough to improve the circumstances of families who struggle to cope with several separate and compounding difficulties. [1]

Interest in well-being issues has tended to focus during the past years on the welfare of children rather than on the well-being of families. But growing policy interest in children's welfare has led to efforts to improve the ways that well-being is measured more holistically, within the family as a unit. As the UN General Assembly resolution 68/136 recalls, "the family has the primary responsibility for the nurturing and protection of children and children, for the full and harmonious development of their personality, should grow up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding."

There is also a growing recognition of intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. They mostly relate to reciprocal care, support and exchange of material and non-material resources between family members, typically younger and older generations.

Percentage of children living with...



Source: Eurostat.

In other words, although basic human functioning is so immediately dependent on key resources such as food and shelter, we cannot forget to focus on key indicators of the 'being and doing' side of human functioning, and not only the 'having' side in our core concept of well-being. [2]

That is why it would be interesting to reach a scientific consensus on how many or which aspects of people's lives should be considered as essential to well-being, nor is there a clear theoretical basis for interpreting composite measures or indices that are constructed utilizing methods such as factor analysis.

New routes to family

To move towards that consensus, it should be considered that the traditional route to family life – marriage, cohabitation and parenthood – is no longer the only possible or permissible sequence of events. In fact, a variety of family types have emerged which seem to have less to do with lifestyle choices and more to do with the economic circumstances in which men and women find themselves. "The key question is whether the well-being of parents and children varies systematically between the different family types." [3]

However, the above chart shows that changes are not as drastic as it seems sometimes. It ranks countries by how likely children are to live with two parents in the European Union (excluding its last member, Croatia). In most countries, 7-9 out of 10 children live in two-parent families, in most of which the parents are married and have been together since at least the birth of the study child. In some cases, the parents are cohabiting, a family type with a less-advantaged social profile and greater risk of instability than married families, or they are step-families, over half of which are the outcome of never-married lone parents forming a second

union. The remaining families (one to two) are headed by lone parents' (37.1%). [4]

Family breakdown

Whenever it happens, family breakdown is not a simple event, but a process that involves a number of risk and protective factors that interact in complex ways both before and after parental separation or divorce to increase or limit the risk of the adverse outcomes associated with family breakdown. These inter-related factors include parental conflict; the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships; maternal mental health; financial hardship; and repeated changes in living arrangements, including family structure.

Parental conflict is a key variable associated with negative outcomes in children from both intact and non-intact families. Research in this area clearly shows that family functioning has a greater impact on outcomes than family structure. High levels of conflict, stress resulting from the separation and/or resulting poverty can all negatively affect maternal mental health. Poor mental health affects the ability of parents, whether married, separated or divorced, to parent effectively, which in turn impacts on children's well-being. Financial hardship and the stress it induces can both contribute to family breakdown and is often a consequence of it. When compared with their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, children from poorer backgrounds, whether from intact or non-intact families, generally do less well across a number of measures, such as health and educational attainment.

Compared with two parent families, lone parent families tend to be significantly worse off financially. Financial hardship increases the likelihood of other variables associated with negative outcomes, such as poor housing, health problems, poor nutrition and fewer material resources for nurturing children. [5]

Different studies show that although children are at increased risk of adverse outcomes following family breakdown and that negative outcomes can persist into adulthood, the difference between children from intact and non-intact families can be reduced if they are helped, and the majority of children would not be adversely affected in the long-term.

Reducing the risk of a negative impact on child outcomes means also understanding the mechanisms involved in the process of family breakdown and how they impact on child outcomes. The evidence shows that high levels of parental conflict, the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships, poor maternal mental health and financial hardship interact in complex ways before, during and after parental separation, and impact on child outcomes. "The multiple transitions that children can experience following parental separation are also a significant explanatory factor. It is clear from the evidence that how the family functions, rather than family type, is more relevant to understanding the impacts associated with family breakdown." [6]

Some risk factors

The presence of depressive symptoms and smoking among mothers is strongly linked to socio economic status: mothers with lower secondary education are five to six times more likely to smoke and more than three times more likely to show depressive symptoms than those with postgraduate education. Fathers report much lower levels of depressive symptoms than mothers. Risk of obesity among mothers varies by socio economic status only to a limited degree. [7]

Married mothers have lower risk of depression than lone parents. However, closer analysis shows that conflict with the child's father is the crucial factor: lone mothers who reported low or no conflict are not significantly different from married mothers in risk of depression.

Mothers with larger families have a lower risk of depression, perhaps in part because non-depressed mothers are likely to have more children. However, the association between large family size and higher conflict among separated or divorced mothers, coupled with the link between higher conflict and depression, suggests that the associations between family size and parental well-being are complex and vary by family context.

Co-residence with a grandparent (usually, that is, the mother's own parent or parents) is associated with lower risk of depression and smoking among mothers.

Children are more likely to experience non-optimal parenting from non-resident than resident fathers, and mothers who are depressed or have conflict with the child's father are somewhat more likely to have conflict with the child, but neither of these linkages is very strong.

Families transition's outcomes *

Demographic and social changes in the last three decades have resulted in families that are sometimes more diverse and complex in their structure. More couples are becoming parents while cohabiting without getting married, though the risk of parental separation among this group is higher. Also, divorce rates among married parents have remained relatively constant and the number of step-families has grown.

As a consequence, children now have a higher probability of experiencing parental separation, having a lone parent or being part of a step-family. The impact this experience has on them should be a key issue for policymakers since although the government wants to support stable relationships between parents, where they break down there is a responsibility to lessen negative effects for children as much as possible.

On a range of outcomes including educational achievement, behavior, mental health, self-concept, social competence and long-term health, there are significant differences between children who experience parental separation compared with children from intact families.

Although the difference between the two groups is statistically significant, effect sizes are not always the same, reflecting the fact that within both groups, children vary widely in their experiences. Children whose parents separate can experience circumstances known to increase the risk of poor outcomes such as poverty, parental conflict, violence and poor parenting, whilst children from intact families may not experience these or can cope well. Long-term effects in adults, who as children have experienced family breakdown, include problems with mental health and well-being, alcohol use, lower educational attainment and problems with relationships.

While family transitions place children at an increased risk of negative outcomes, the evidence shows that not all children and adolescents experience enduring problems, and a few of them can actually benefit when it brings to an end a 'harmful' family situation, for example where there are high levels of parental conflict, including violence.

* *Cfr. Ann Mooney, Chris Oliver and Marjorie Smith, Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being - Evidence Review (Institute of Education, University of London).*

What is a functional family?

Changes and transitions of different sorts feature in all children's lives. Helping children to manage changes and transitions through, for example, improving their coping skills and resilience, is likely to benefit all children, some of whom may have experienced, or will in the future experience, parental separation.

If families are able to successfully carry out their basic functions then they might be said to contribute to positive individual and social outcomes. Viewing family well-being as the ability of families to fulfill their basic functions then requires that those basic functions are identified and agreed. "Unfortunately there is no definitive list of core functions, although there is some agreement on what a list might include. There is also

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debate over the extent to which some of the traditional functions of the family are now no longer the sole preserve of the family. The development of a conceptual framework will need to be guided by research evidence." [8]

Having conceptualised family well-being, it will be necessary to identify relevant domains of interest and select indicators that measure key components and dimensions of the model. As with the development of the conceptual framework, this stage will be challenging. "The complex nature of family well-being will make the development and selection of appropriate and meaningful indicators that measure the concept in question difficult. Pragmatic decisions will be required." [9] Key considerations include the multifaceted nature of family well-being—reflecting the range of functions families have—; measurement of the factors that promote or detract from optimal family functioning; utility of using both a subjective and objective sense; the need to capture the collective well-being of individual family members and that part of family well-being that concerns the well-being of the entity itself over and above the well-being of individual family members; the need to monitor family well-being over time; and how to manage data limitations, such as the limited number of data sources that look at families rather than households or individuals.

Well-being is a vast and complex family outcome. As a result, programs need to carefully plan and implement their approach to address the many different strengths and needs of the families they serve. [10] The first step would be to learn about the overall strengths and challenges of families in a program. Once a program has assessed family, community, and program assets and needs, individualized support targeted information can be offered and resources, and trainings develop community partnerships implemented.

[1] Cfr. Lorraine Swords, Brian Merriman, and Michelle O'Donnell, 'Family Wellbeing on a Limited Income: A Study of Families Living at Risk of Poverty in Ireland' (Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin).

[2] Cfr. Tony Fahey, Patricia Keilthy and Ela Polek, 'Family Relationships and Family Well-Being: A Study of the Families of Nine Year-Olds in Ireland' (University College – Dublin).

[3] Kieran McKeown, Jonathan Pratschke and Trutz Haase, 'Family Well-Being: What Makes A Difference?' (Kieran McKeown Limited, Dublin).

[4] Eurostat, 'Living condition statistics' (2013). Cfr. also OECD, 'Living arrangements of children' (2010).

[5] Cfr. Ann Mooney, Chris Oliver and Marjorie Smith, 'Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being - Evidence Review' (Institute of Education, University of London).

[6] Ibidem.

[7] Tony Fahey, Patricia Keilthy and Ela Polek, 'Family Relationships ...'.

[8] Jeremy Robertson, 'A Framework towards Measuring Family Wellbeing' (Families and Whānau Status Report – New Zealand).

[9] Kieran McKeown, Jonathan Pratschke and Trutz Haase, 'Family Well-Being ...'.

[10] Cfr. National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 'Family Well-being - Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes', Research to Practice Series.