

4

A new plan for the family

RICHARD T. GILL & T. GRANDON GILL

IN 1991, the much-publicized Rockefeller Report[†] declared that “the family is and should remain society’s primary institution for bringing children into the world and for supporting their growth and development throughout childhood.”

Nearly everyone agrees. Unfortunately, the American family is not fulfilling this objective. It is not doing so “throughout childhood,” and it is not even doing so for infants and toddlers.

If we look at intact families with children under age six, we find that in the majority of these families both parents are working. Fathers almost always work full-time, and two-thirds of working mothers do, too. Care of their children is left to others.

These are intact families. But fathers are fleeing the home in increasing numbers. Despite much talk of the new caring, nur-

[†]*Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (Final Report of the National Commission on Children: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).

turing father, the central fact in recent years is the growing absence of the father, whether because of illegitimacy, divorce, or desertion. In 1988, over one-third of children under eighteen were living without the presence of the biological father. By 1990, nearly 10 percent of American children (6.2 million) were living without *either* parent.

Adding the final touch to the picture, there are important pressures to adopt public policies that would further reduce the role of the family as the "primary institution" for raising young children. Federal legislation passed in 1990 encourages out-of-home day care. And the family-leave legislation passed earlier this year, though admirable in its intent to foster in-home care for newborns, also serves as an incentive for parents to return to their jobs within a few weeks of childbirth.

Is this, then, the end of the matter? The end of the historic link between families and young children? Is "the problem," as Isabel Sawhill put it in a recent Brookings Institution report, simply "that no one knows how to fix the family"?

In this article, we consider one important step that might be taken to strengthen families with young children. We call it a Parental Bill of Rights.

Older men and younger mothers

In recent decades, American society has created a dramatically new life sequence for the average citizen. This new life sequence is the result of two major changes: (1) the increasingly early and lengthy retirement of older men, and (2) the increasingly active labor force participation of women.

In the case of older men, official estimates are that labor force participation for males over age sixty-four has plummeted from 68 percent in 1890 to 17 percent in 1988. Actually, the change is even more dramatic. Recent research suggests virtually all of the decline in labor force participation has taken place since the 1940s.

Men between fifty-five and sixty-four are also working less. In 1948, 90 percent were working; forty years later, only 67 percent are. Considering that life expectancy rose sharply during the same period, these changes in work patterns can only be described as revolutionary.

The question of why men are leaving the labor force so early is the subject of a vast literature. But the most important reason is clear: Men are retiring earlier because they can afford to. They can afford to because we are a much richer society than we used to be. But they can also afford to retire earlier because of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, disability insurance, public pensions, and tax-deferred private pensions. Through these programs and others, the U.S. government makes very large payments to elderly citizens. These payments appear particularly large when compared with government payments to young adults and children.

The second key demographic fact is the striking increase in the number of women working, in particular women with young children. If older men often quit work because they can afford to, these young women often work because they can't afford not to.

Betty Friedan once said that women are rushing into the labor force out of "sheer economic necessity," in order to "survive." This argument is buttressed by statistics that show income has grown more slowly for younger than older workers in recent years.

Even so, the concepts of "economic necessity" and "survival" clearly have to be reinterpreted somewhat if we are to take any kind of historical perspective on the matter. Barbara Bergmann, a forceful supporter of the cause of women in the work force, has noted that "a husband in the 1980s commands a salary that is (after accounting for inflation) perhaps four times as large as [that of] his counterpart at the turn of the century, whose wife did not 'need' to work. If today's family is so well provided for by the salary of the husband alone, in what sense does the family 'need' the wife's paycheck?"

Furthermore, where economic "necessity" would appear to be less—in intact, as opposed to single-parent families, and for educated, as opposed to uneducated women—labor force participation is higher. Of mothers with infants, 68 percent of those with four or more years of college are in the labor force, compared to 30 percent of those who have less than a high school education.

This is, of course, a reversal of the older pattern in which only mothers in very poor families would go out to make money. The great increase in the modern era is coming from women whose husbands are quite well off. Indeed, many analysts have

emphasized the lure of higher wages, rather than economic pressures, in explaining this dramatic change in women's labor force participation.

Still, we would defend the general notion that women in today's America work because they "can't afford not to." And they can't afford not to because: (a) there are some cases of genuine economic necessity; (b) "need," after a certain minimum of subsistence has been attained, is a very subjective matter and clearly applies to a much wider range of goods and services in a technologically advanced society than in earlier and more primitive times; (c) among these new and more available goods and services is, for the conscientious parent, an increasingly expensive college education for one's children; (d) no matter what one's husband is earning, there is always the possibility of divorce—obviously a very serious possibility today and one the wife will want to protect herself against by developing educational and work experience; and (e) there is the overwhelming fact that in a long life expectancy, low birth rate society, there really is no serious alternative to major lifelong working careers for most women. The career of full-time wife, mother, and homemaker has simply ceased to be an adequate life project.

This last point is in some ways the most vital of all. What it suggests is that a major cost of not working when one's children are very young is that one may thereby miss out on what *could* be an adequate life project—i.e., a full and satisfying career outside the home. If we are interested in programs designed to restore the family as the "primary institution" for raising our young children, we will have to confront squarely the obstacles that any interruption of already launched careers would present to young mothers and fathers.

Working longer and later

We want to consider now the possibility of reversing developments to some degree, that is, of altering life sequences so that individuals would work longer into their life spans and would devote added years to bringing up their children at home. In short, later work years would be substituted for earlier ones.

We believe this shift is feasible, for several reasons:

First, we know that when we were a poorer society, not only a century or half-century but even thirty years ago, parents were

somehow able to bring up their young children without undue strain. If we calculate the "total dependency ratio"—the number of persons under twenty and over sixty-four, divided by the number of persons between twenty and sixty-four—we find that ratio was exceedingly high in 1960 (0.90) and, indeed, higher than it is today (0.70) and higher than it is projected to be in 2040 (0.81), when all the baby boomers are over 64. Yet somehow parents in the 1960s made a go of things.

Second, today's elderly are clearly capable of working longer. Most are in good health, and the nature of work today—mostly services rather than manual labor—is well-suited to their capabilities.

Third, the number of years out of the labor force that at-home parental child care would require is, in a low birth rate society, quite limited. If we assume that a parent would stay home until his or her children were beyond preschool, then for an average family with two children we are talking about seven or eight years from one parent's work life. Since some parents already provide at-home care for their young children, the loss of labor for society would be even less.

The loss of labor would be small for an additional reason: If parents do not take care of their preschool children, someone else must. Considering the cost and labor-intensity of quality child care, this is a major factor.

Fourth, and finally, the fact that retirement ages have so clearly been influenced by public policies such as Social Security suggests that other public policies could lead to later retirements.

It is sometimes forgotten that one of the major reasons for the introduction of the Social Security system during the Depression was to encourage older workers to retire, in order to make greater job opportunities available for younger workers. Policies can and do make a difference and can be adjusted as circumstances change.

A Parental Bill of Rights

All this is by way of necessary background for the public policy proposal we shall sketch out in the next few pages. Ideally, a pro-family policy would meet the following minimum conditions:

1. It would not jeopardize the career prospects of a spouse who remained at home while the children were of preschool age.
2. It would be in the nature of an investment expenditure, ultimately repaying itself to society, rather than a consumption expenditure, which has no long-run dividends.
3. It would not encourage parents to have more and more children so that they could stay out of the labor force indefinitely as welfare dependents.
4. And, of course, it would encourage parents to provide primary care for their own children, at least for the first five years of life—the central point of the exercise.

We propose that the centerpiece of such a policy should be a Parental Bill of Rights, modeled on the G.I. Bill of Rights adopted near the end of World War II. The essential premise of a Parental Bill of Rights would be that parents who raise their own young children perform an extremely important social service. By doing so, however, they sacrifice both current income and long-run career prospects. In return for these socially desirable sacrifices, society will compensate them by subsidizing their further education so that they can more effectively reenter the labor force, or, if younger, enter the labor force for the first time. Such education, as under the original G.I. Bill, could be at the high school, vocational school, college, graduate, or even post-graduate level.

In the case of returning veterans, the essential logic was the same: These men and women had made notable sacrifices for a highly desirable social end. While in service, they had received very low wages and also had their educations and careers disrupted, in some cases for a period of several years. Society repaid these veterans by providing them with a subsidy that included tuition, books, and a subsistence income, so that they could complete an educational program that would help them succeed in civilian life.

And what a dividend society itself reaped! Under the G.I. Bill and successive acts, over 19 million Americans went on to higher education or to various forms of vocational, technical, or other career training. In a recent article in *Newsweek*, James Michener "judged the law one of the two or three finest Congress has ever

passed since our Constitution took effect." Peter Drucker, writing in *The Public Interest*, dated the beginning of the information age itself from the passage of the G.I. Bill. The William T. Grant Commission explains:

By this one stroke of national policy, the nation's pool of trained talent was expanded manifold and the postsecondary educational domain, once the preserve of an affluent elite, was democratized beyond that of any other country. Fueled, at least in part, by so many newly skilled hands and trained minds, the United States enjoyed the longest period of economic expansion and prosperity in our history.

Without any question, the G.I. Bill was one of the most successful programs the federal government ever launched.

How would such a program, adapted to the needs of parents of young children, meet the four general conditions that we outlined above?

First, it would enhance the career prospects of the spouse who stayed home to take care of the children. As we have seen, a major cost to the parent of such child care is the interruption to an already established career or the delay in launching a career. It is well known that these interruptions and delays are, in the present state of affairs, never fully made up later in the person's work experience. To combat this potential loss, the Parental Bill of Rights would make it possible for the parent to achieve an offsetting gain: a higher level of education and training than could otherwise be undertaken. This promise of further education and eased reentry into the labor force would also reduce the caregiver's need to accumulate market skills as a protection against divorce.

Second, the furthering of the parent's education would pay off later in higher productivity. Recent studies from the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Census Bureau, and many other sources document the very high returns to education in today's America, and also the shortage of highly skilled workers.

There would actually be two investment gains: (1) the increase in the parent's productivity, and (2) the benefit to the child of closer parental care during the early years of life.

Third, it is unlikely that a Parental Bill of Rights would lead parents to continue having children in order to accumulate more and more educational credits. In any event, this is a danger

easily guarded against. A limit could be imposed on the number of educational credits that could be collected. One could also design the program so that credits could be used only when there were no longer preschool-age children in the family. Parents would then have an incentive to finish their child-rearing years in a fairly compact way so that they could get on with their education and careers.

Finally, a Parental Bill of Rights would certainly move society in the direction of increased at-home parental care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The size of the impact would of course depend on the specific design of the program—the size of tuition benefits, the size of allowances for living expenses, the number of years over which benefits could be spread, and so forth.

Who would pay?

How would Parental Bill subsidies be financed? In a more comprehensive paper that is forthcoming^{††}, a model program is sketched out with specific financing suggestions. For the moment we stress the basic idea, which would be to induce a shift of labor force participation from young parents to older workers. Our analysis indicates that the required increase in labor force participation by older workers would not be large. Still, it is prudent to assume that some increase in the average age of retirement would be needed.

There are many public policy levers that could be pulled to achieve such an effect, the most obvious being to increase the age for Social Security eligibility. Since all evidence indicates that public subsidies in recent years have been disproportionately focused on older age groups, such a method of financing is clearly defensible.

Although there would be some transition problems, in the long run each generation would basically finance its own programs. As with public education, some of the costs would be sustained by households without children. It would also be desirable, however, for parents who directly benefit from the subsidies to pay some additional share of the costs, most likely

^{††}Paper to be presented at the June 1993 conference on marriage of the Institute for American Values.

through deferred eligibility for Social Security. These costs should be borne by both parents, even though in many cases only the mother will enjoy the educational benefits of the program.

How would a Parental Bill of Rights affect single women with children? By tilting incentives toward at-home parental care, the program would unquestionably militate against various workfare and child-care subsidy schemes that might be introduced to address the problems these single mothers face. The difficulty is particularly acute when, as is often the case, these women are in poverty. Essentially, there are three public policy alternatives here: (1) encourage poor women on welfare to work and have others bring up their preschool children; (2) encourage them to bring up their own preschool children and then later get training and education so that they can become more productive members of the labor force; or (3) preserve strict neutrality between these options.

Each alternative has obvious arguments in its favor. Suffice it to say here that for those who believe the family should be the primary institution for raising children, the second alternative would be preferred. Encouraging education and training through a strong Parental Bill of Rights is, arguably, the best overall policy for helping single-parent welfare families. If actual experience showed otherwise, it would of course be possible to amend the plan. We might also try experimenting with two different approaches—day care and workfare vs. parental care and subsequent Parental Bill training. Flexibility is both possible and desirable.

The challenge

Most public policies aimed at helping children have an unfortunate tendency to replace and hence undermine basic family institutions. Thus while solving superficial problems, they only intensify the underlying problem.

But this need not be. With a Parental Bill of Rights, we can simultaneously strengthen the position of young parents, their children, and the economic and overall well-being of society. A properly conceived Parental Bill would do all these things. Indeed, the real question is not whether stronger families can be achieved, but the seriousness of our commitment to achieving them.

Copyright of Public Interest is the property of Public Interest and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.