Competing Visions of the Child, the Family, and the School

Jennifer Roback Morse

This article suggests a new way of understanding the connections between the child, his parents, and the school. The currently dominant view of the triad of child, parents, and school focuses on the delivery of resources to children. Under this vision, the primary connection between the parents and children is the transfer of resources. The school's role is to replace material, intellectual, psychological, or moral resources that the family fails to deliver.

I propose an alternative vision. The most important role that parents play is to build a relationship with their child. The transfer of resources from parents to children is a by-product of this primary job of creating a relationship. The school's role in this scenario is to act as a partner or assistant, but not as a substitute for the parents.

This shift in vision has consequences for educational policy and for social policy more generally. Assigning primacy to the relationship over the resources implies that the public should not transfer resources to children if it undermines the parent-child relationship. At the very least, policy-makers should find some way to effect the transfer of resources that will support rather than undermine the family.

In this paper, I give reasons to believe that the primary role of the family is the building of relationships. I defend this proposition with evidence drawn from several sources. The experience of children who have no families at all demonstrates the importance of relationships relative to resources. I also draw from the evidence showing that children with disrupted parental relationships have a variety of difficulties, including problems in school. Finally, I offer examples that illustrate the impact of parental involvement on educational outcomes.

Debating on the turf labeled "transferring resources from big people to little people" stacks the deck in favor of an intrusive public policy regarding children. Changing the terms of the debate to "building up the relationships inside the family" reveals that there are costs to indiscriminately assigning quasi-parental authority to public agencies, including schools. Focusing on the relational aspect of the family also points the direction toward policy options that are scarcely even on today's policy agenda.

CURRENT POLICIES THAT TRANSFER RESOURCES WHILE UNDERMINING THE FAMILY

It may seem a bit hysterical to conceive of the present policy paradigm as attempting to supply resources the family fails to deliver. Here are just a few of the many policies and recent proposals with exactly that thrust. Not only do these policies replace parental resources with public resources, there is good reason to expect that these policies will weaken the relationship between parents and children, rather than build it up.

Universal Preschool

In October 1999, the Department of Education released a study of 111 very poor children. The study concluded that an intensive early intervention preschool program improved their chances of going to college. The academics who conducted this study and the Department of Education, which funded it, used this research as an argument for universal day care beginning

in infancy. Some advocates of universal day care go so far as to claim that it will be a cost-effective crime-control program.[1]

Universal day care means care for the children of well-educated professionals, and for the children of dedicated working-class parents who sacrifice to keep an adult in the home all day. The study had absolutely nothing to say about the impact of preschool on these populations, since the test group was a group whose parents were extremely poor and uneducated.

Universal School Breakfast Program

In May 2000, the federal government approved a pilot study designed to test the question whether children's school performance is improved by providing all children of all income levels a free breakfast at school. The proponent of the study, Rep. Lynn Woolsey, predicted the outcome of the study: providing a free breakfast for all students will prove to be a wise educational investment and a better way to care for children. "We know that a good breakfast is as necessary to a good education as are books, pencils or computers. . . . (Public schools) don't ask wealthy children to pay for books or supplies," and she maintained they should take the same approach to school breakfast. One proponent said, "We think that just because there is food in the refrigerator (at home) that a child is going to eat breakfast," as an argument that even well-off parents cannot be counted on to feed their children breakfast.[2]

So, in an era of unprecedented prosperity, the state proposes to take over one of the most primal functions of the family, to feed its own young.

Berkeley Sues Home School Parents

In June 2000, bureaucrats at California's Berkeley Unified School District brought proceedings against four families there who homeschool their children. When the families were summoned to a truancy hearing at which they declined to provide attendance records or curriculum information, they were referred to the Alameda County District Attorney

for contributing to the delinquency of minors. The families contended, however, that refusing to present documents is their right under the California Education Code.

It is hard to imagine a deeper commitment to the welfare of one's child than the commitment to educate them at home. Yet, the educational authorities are spending time and resources attacking these dedicated families. Observers say that money is behind the most recent attack. Schools are reimbursed by the state according to their average daily attendance. The more pupils—including homeschoolers who might be lassoed in—the more money the school gets, the more teachers to be hired, the more union members recruited, and the more union dues collected.[3]

Besides these recent headlines, policymakers over the last generation have called upon the schools to provide an increasing array of noneducational services. Some schools teach things as mundane as toothbrushing and personal hygiene. Many schools have on-site day care centers, offering care before and after school. It isn't unusual for schools to sponsor various kinds of health-screening services, such as vision screening. Some elected officials advocate publicly funded health clinics on school grounds, where students can receive medical care without parental consent or knowledge.

Besides these instances of schools providing basic care for children, many schools have expanded their curriculum to include topics once universally regarded as the domain of the family. Sex education teaches children "the facts of life," while "death education" teaches them the facts of death. Schools have implemented "values clarification" programs as substitutes for parental instruction in morals. Many parents believe that these programs work at cross purposes with their own objectives of teaching good moral behavior. Parents have sometimes found it difficult to remove their own children from these courses, much less to get the school to change the curriculum altogether.[4]

Thus, the schools have become suppliers of resources to children, often in opposition to the interests or wishes of the

family. It is hardly alarmist to observe that, whatever their intentions, many policymakers have placed the school in the position of substituting for family resources. The question of whether policies such as these support or undermine the family is hardly ever raised, much less considered decisive.

Many critics of these trends focus on what might be called "the academic crowding-out effect." Time spent teaching values clarification or toothbrushing is time that cannot be spent teaching math or phonics. I take a different approach. I focus on the "family crowding-out effect." The time that children spend in school is time taken away from the family. The responsibilities taken over by the schools are responsibilities that no longer fall upon the family.

The primary duty of parents is to build relationships with their children. Building relationships requires time, above all. The responsibilities of parents toward their children are a vital part of the web of connections between them. Eating together, doing chores together, sometimes just doing nothing together; these are all part of being in a relationship with another person. In the process of being together, children learn to trust their parents as a source of sustenance as well as information, guidance, and protection. These connections and the trust that flows from them prepare children to be in other, more distant, relationships that also require trust and trustworthy behavior.[5]

Giving explicit moral instruction is only a small part of how parents impart information about how to behave decently. Children obtain this kind of moral knowledge by the example of how their parents live. Seeing their parents and participating with them in all kinds of activities is a part of that process. As the state takes over the time parents spend with children and the responsibilities that parents owe to children, it diminishes the opportunities for building connections inside the family. If parents fail to build bonds with their children, the benefits cannot so easily be replaced by schools.

To see why the parent-child relationship is so important, and how unlikely it is to be replaced, we turn to a discussion

of children without any relationships at all: children who were raised in eastern European orphanages.

CHILDREN WITH NO RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding the problems of the abandoned infant shows how many and subtle are the ways in which a loving family influences a child's development. Mothers and babies do more together than we can easily replace through even the most expansive or best-funded public policies.

Orphanage workers and developmental pediatricians report the "failure to thrive" syndrome observed in minimal-care orphanages. Children who are deprived of human contact during infancy sometimes fail to gain weight and to develop, even though all the bodily, material needs of the child are met.[6] The children who survive infancy in the orphanage frequently have sensory-integration problems. The children cannot successfully integrate incoming sensory information, so they are overwhelmed by sounds, sights, and tactile sensations.[7] Children with auditory-processing disorder frequently score adequately on standard picture vocabulary tests of the kind given to preschoolers, but they have difficulty responding to multiple commands, answering questions or performing tasks that require sequencing information.[8]

The tactile system of the body helps to determine where on the body the person is being touched and what is touching them. This can be a protective system that triggers the fight or flight response when dangerous sensations are registered.[9] The vestibular sense of the body gives a child information about where his head is in relation to solid ground. This sense tells a child about movement and gravity. The proprioceptive sense relates to the child's sense of body position. This is the system that lets us know the relative position of our body parts, without the use of our vision.[10]

Because these basic bodily senses are the foundation for an array of motor and coordination skills, these children have a surprising array of developmental and educational problems.

These kids are hampered in their ability to do motor planning for activities as simple as crawling, pedaling a bicycle, or using stairs. They might have trouble with simple tasks that require coordinating both sides of the body, such as catching a large ball, using a rolling pin, or tying shoes. Such a child may have difficulty with pencil and paper tasks required in elementary school. Even holding the pencil may be a problem, much less coordinating the hands with the eyes. The child may find it difficult to sit at a desk for very long because he is continually aware of the tactile input he gets just from sitting.[11]

The most surprising deficit correlated with sensory-integration problems is a difficulty with speech and language development. The connection had been noted by American researcher A. Jean Ayers,[12] who discovered that spinning or rocking a child can sometimes enhance his ability to develop speech and language. The connection was strengthened by the observations of eastern European orphans who exhibited both extreme sensory integration and language difficulties.

For children raised in normal families, the sensory systems develop in the ordinary course of life. Adults pick up the child, hold him, rock him, tickle him, and play with him. In these earliest months, the child learns primarily through bodily or motor processes, rather than intellectual or cognitive processes. When daddies and big brothers toss the baby in the air, or give her an airplane ride, or spin her around, they are, whether they realize it or not, stimulating the vestibular and the proprioceptive bodily-movement systems. In a pathetic attempt to take care of themselves, many post-institutionalized children stimulate themselves by spinning and rocking, at an age when most children have outgrown the need to be rocked.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEGLECTED INFANT

Reflecting on the myriad difficulties of the abandoned infant suggests transferring resources is certainly not the best way to understand what goes on between mothers and babies. The losses these children sustain are so numerous, so profound,

and so resistant to correction that they require thousands of dollars, and hundreds of hours of highly trained specialists from numerous disciplines just to bring the child back to a very low threshold of normal functioning. Needless to say, the resources needed to repair this damage far exceed any reasonable value we might place on the mother's time, even the fulltime commitment of a highly educated and highly paid mother.

Reflecting on the neglected infant also helps us appreciate the surprising importance of the simple activities that parents do with their babies. Most parents rock their babies and look into their eyes, without realizing that this activity wards off attachment disorder. Very few parents are conscious of the fact that they are stimulating their baby's vestibular and proprioceptive systems when they bounce the baby on their knees, or pick them up above the head and wiggle them. Most parents don't realize that they are teaching their child basic trust and reciprocity every time they play peek-a-boo. People have been playing patty-cake with babies for generations without realizing that this simple game stimulates the development of motor planning and coordination.

We can apply one of the great insights of the theory of free societies to this intricate set of interactions between parents and children. Frederick Hayek argued that free economies would outperform centrally planned economies. The free, decentralized economy uses the local information and tacit knowledge of particular times and circumstances. He argued further that a centrally planned economy could never gather this information, no matter how aggressive the data-gathering collection procedures, no matter how sophisticated the computers.[13]

In a specialized economy, people become highly focused on the particular thing they produce. They have a tremendous amount of knowledge about their own little corner of the world, both literally and figuratively. They know their specialty and their locality. Much of this knowledge is tacit, not explicit. People routinely use knowledge they can barely articulate. They might be able to describe what they do and why in broad outlines. But a large percentage of their activities defy

the kind of description that is detailed enough to be useful to a far-away planning commissar.

In a free society, people use this information because it is in their interest to do the best job they can do, even if they can't fully explain how and why they do it. A lot of information is generated and carried by the prices in a free economy. Very few people stop to reflect upon exactly what goes into the making of prices, even of products they use every day. Hayek argued that the attempt to replace the decentralized price system with a centrally planned, command economy would squander all this information.

There is a very strong analogy with the work of parenthood. Most parents cannot articulate the physiological and psychological significance of the activities they do with their children. Indeed, if you ask the mother of an infant what she did all day, she is unlikely to be able to even describe her activities, except in the most general way. She might tell you how many times she changed his diaper. But she will probably forget to mention that she looked in the baby's eyes, wiggled his toes, and laughed while she imitated his baby babbling sounds. She might tell you she folded laundry and did dishes. But she probably won't remember that she rewarded every little noise her baby made, by smiling at the baby, or imitating the baby's sound, or having an imaginary conversation with him. Far more work is going on in a normal mother-infant pair than we would ever have imagined, in the absence of the horrendous counterexample provided by our little eastern European orphans.

Parents naturally know more about their particular child than even the most dedicated professional. Parents care about the welfare of their child and will go out of their way to pursue it. We cannot reasonably expect professional educators, psychologists, doctors, or any other specialists to care in the same way. The knowledge that specialists can provide has to be used by someone who specializes in the specific case of this particular child. Parents are in a position to know whether their child is responding well to a particular

specialized course of study or medical treatment. The child needs the parent to run the gauntlet of the experts to sift the appropriate from the inapplicable.

This is the work we are risking when we attempt to replace the family with institutions. The further down that path we go, the more we risk. I do not mean to say that there is a one-to-one connection between each and every one of these syndromes and an increase in nonmaternal care. I do not mean to suggest that children in American day cares are at an increased risk for each and every one of these problems, still less that children in public schools are at higher risks for such syndromes. I do mean to say that when Horace Mann and John Dewey set us off down this road of sequestering children in age-segregated institutions, we had no idea what was at the end of that road.

Reflecting on the neglected infant illustrates the primacy of relationship-building in the child's life, as well as the improbability of replacing all the work of the family by a mere transfer of resources. We turn now to another sort of evidence about the importance of relationships for the child's development: the evidence from American families with disrupted relationships. This material is immediately relevant to education policy because we can see a close connection between broken relationships and school performance.

CHILDREN WITH BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

By now, social scientists have accumulated an impressive body of evidence showing the educational and emotional difficulties that children in single-parent families, and even stepfamilies, face.[14] One review of studies found that children from mother-only families obtain fewer years of education and are more likely to drop out of high school. Offspring from mother-only families are more likely to commit delinquent acts and to engage in drug and alcohol use than offspring from two-parent families.[15] The lower incomes of single-parent families account for only a portion of the differences between

mother-only families and two-parent families. The effects of single motherhood are consistent across a large number of racial and ethnic groups.[16]

Children of single parents are more likely to have academic problems. Children from disrupted marriages were over 70 percent more likely than those living with both biological parents to have been expelled or suspended: those living with never-married mothers were more than twice as likely to have had this experience. Children with both biological parents were less likely to have repeated a grade of school.[17]

Mother-only families may create spillover effects on other children in the schools.[18] One recent study, using a nationally representative sample of over 20,000 eighth-graders from 970 schools, took account of parental income and education, and the mean level of socioeconomic status of the families attending the school. Being in a single-parent family not only lowered a child's math score, but also had an impact on other students. Students who attended schools with a high concentration of students from single-parent households had math and reading achievement scores that were 11 percent and 10 percent, respectively, lower than students who attended schools with a higher concentration of two-parent households.

Children living in single-parent households are also more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. The children outside of two-parent families had 50–80 percent higher scores for indicators of antisocial behavior, peer conflict, social withdrawal, and age-inappropriate dependency. Such children also had 25–50 percent higher scores for indicators of anxiety, depression, headstrong behavior, and hyperactivity.[19] These conditions, if serious enough, can land a child in special education classes.

One might think that replacing the absent father with a new man would alleviate some of the children's difficulties. A stepfather typically does bring additional income to the family and potentially could increase the amount of adult time and attention the children receive. But, consistent with

the hypothesis that relationships are more important than increased resources, introducing a "new father" into the picture does not necessarily solve the child's problems, and may add some new ones.

The psychological adjustment and educational achievement of children in stepfamilies is similar to that of children in one-parent families.[20] For instance, children with stepfathers have approximately the same high risk of repeating a year of school as do the children of never-married mothers, around 75 percent. The increase in risk was 40 percent for children of divorced mothers.[21] A recent study found that when a stepfather enters the home, children exhibit more behavior problems compared to their peers who live with both biological parents, and the impact is slightly stronger for boys than for girls.[22]

Another recent study tried to capture the effects of father involvement on "home problems" and "school problems." The study found that more involvement by any type of father, including a stepfather, reduces both problems at home and in the school.[23] However, the study also showed that stepfathers are less involved with the children. The presence of a stepfather is correlated with less involvement from the mother. Since mother's involvement correlates with fewer child problems, the presence of a stepfather in effect delivers a double whammy to the kids. Stepfathers spend less time with children than biological fathers, and a stepfather reduces the time mothers spend with their children.[24]

These problems can translate into lowered academic achievement. One study specifically examined the relationship of family structure, time spent with kids, and academic achievement.[25] Children in two-parent families got the highest grades of any family structure. The time fathers, stepfathers, and biological fathers alike spent with children had a positive impact on their grades. However, because stepfathers spend so much less time with kids than do dads in two-parent families, family structure still has a significant impact on grades.

This evidence is consistent with the major premise of this article: children need relationships more than they need resources, and satisfying the child's relationship needs translates into better academic performance. Children raised in fatherless homes have lower academic achievement, even controlling for the lower incomes of two-parent families. Children in stepfamilies have difficulties, despite the availability of greater adult resources within the family. The relationships, on average, simply are not strong enough to supply the needs that children have.

Virtually all researchers accept the correlation between higher academic achievement and living with both biological parents, because this correlation is present in the raw data of so many studies. The debate among the scholars centers on how much of the difference in academic performance can be accounted for by differences in resources typically found in single-parent households.

I propose that we shift the terms of this debate. It is certainly an admirable impulse to try to increase the resources available to poorer children, but most studies show that some differences in performance remain even after accounting for differences in economic resources. This suggests that the children are harmed by the loss of relationship itself, not simply the loss of resources.

We can begin to do two kinds of things differently. First, we can drop the posture of neutrality among family types, which flies in the face of so much evidence. We need to be willing to see the connection between the decisions of parents to marry or not, or to divorce or not, and the academic performance of the children. It is almost as if policymakers wish they could find any way possible to help the children, short of stating the obvious fact that they would be better off if their parents were married. The premise seems to be: what is the minimal set of human relationships that a child can have and still turn out tolerably well?

This minimalist mentality shows up in the conclusions people draw from studies of the impact of the father's time. Of

course, children would benefit from more time and attention from their fathers. It is perfectly appropriate to encourage fathers, including stepfathers, to spend more time with children. But we are not justified in drawing the conclusion that there is no reason to be concerned about family structure as long as stepfathers spend enough time with their stepchildren.

A similar analysis applies to the debates over support for low-income single mothers, and proposals to crack down on "deadbeat dads." The idea of making sure that single mothers have adequate resources with which to raise their children is certainly reasonable. But it does not follow that the children would be fine in a one-parent household if only the income of that household were high enough.

Many people seem to believe that it is unreasonable to encourage people to get married and stay married. But asking stepfathers to behave like biological fathers may be every bit as difficult a burden. Stepfathers behave systematically differently from biological fathers. It is unrealistic to expect a man to work as hard on a relationship with another man's child as he would with his own child. Nor is it realistic to expect that a father who has been expelled from his home in a nasty divorce will ante up the same amount of money that he would naturally contribute if he were part of a functioning family. It is more straightforward, as well as more sensible, to expect men and women to work together to maintain their marriage relationships in the first place.

This leads to the second way the terms of the debate need to change. We need to stop allowing the minimalist position to go unchallenged. Conservatives used to be accused of minimalism regarding money. Conservative demands for fiscal accountability were frequently countered with the accusation: "You want to spend the least money necessary for getting tolerable educational results."

I don't think anyone seriously believes that this is the issue dividing conservatives and liberals on education anymore. But many people, from both the right and the left, seem to be willing to adopt a minimalist position with regard to relationships

and their impact on children. We seem to be asking, what do I have to do in order to maintain my position that divorce or single-parenthood is not harmful to children? How much money does society have to spend from outside the family to make up for the loss of relationship, so that I won't have to give up my belief that parents are entitled to any lifestyle choices they want? We should confront these relationship issues with more generosity toward the children, rather than asking how little we must do.

Kids with no relationships at all have a terrible time. Kids with disrupted relationships have problems. I propose that we investigate ways to involve the parents more, to use the knowledge and motivation that parents naturally have. Rather than focus on correcting the defects of the worst parents, we should focus on fostering the efforts of the vast majority of ordinary parents, who are perfectly adequate.

CHILDREN WITH PRETTY-GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOOD-ENOUGH PARENTS

No one would argue with the proposition that parents ought to be more involved with their children's education. But one might ask whether it is really practical to ask parents to become more active in the educational lives of their children. Recent studies offer grounds for believing both that additional parental involvement is beneficial to children's academic achievement and that even parents of modest means can become more involved.

For instance, a recent study of 10,000 high school students in Wisconsin and California examined the impact of parental involvement in a child's schooling on the child's grades.[26] Parental involvement was a composite measure of five items: whether parents attend school programs for parents, watch the students in sports or activities, help choose courses, help with homework when asked, and monitor school progress. An increased level of involvement by either mothers or fathers improved student grade-point averages. This held true

across lines of income, race, and parental education levels. In fact, the author concludes, "higher levels of school involvement had the same benefit on grades, irrespective of parents' education or the type of family structure."[27]

This author cites earlier studies that "demonstrated the feasibility of teaching high-risk parents or parents with limited English proficiency to become involved in the schooling of elementary or high school students and documented how this involvement, in turn, benefited their children's performance (Simich-Dudgeon 1993: Smith 1968). These studies suggest that parental school involvement is a malleable parenting practice."[28]

Another study examined the impact of parental involvement on eighth-grade math and reading scores. The study found that having a parent who "discusses school matters" has as great an impact on improving both math and reading scores, as does having a parent with a higher level of education.[29] Taken together, these works give reason to believe that parental involvement by parents of low education or income is just as valuable to their children as involvement by parents with more education or income. And, parents can be persuaded to become more involved.

James Coleman's concept of "social capital" also explains differences in school performance.[30] Social capital in the home concerns the relationships between the child and his or her own parents. One way of understanding the problems of single-parent families is that these families have lower levels of social capital.[31] Social capital within the wider community of the school concerns the wider web of social networks and relationships. Coleman used this notion of social capital to account for the superior academic performance of students in Catholic high schools over public schools. Coleman argued that Catholic schools provided a richer, more dense network of social connections than public schools.[32]

The previously cited study of eighth-grade reading and math scores tested Coleman's thesis by using information about individual students and their families, as well as in-

formation about the school. Parents were asked about their involvement in their child's school, as well as their interaction with other parents in the school. The question asked of the parents was: how many parents of your child's friends do you know? This measure was called "parental social relations" or "parental acquaintances."[33]

This study reported impressive effects on academic performance from the social environment of the school, as measured by mean number of parental acquaintances. More parental interaction with other parents increases the average math and reading scores of the school. These effects persist even after controlling for the average socioeconomic status of the families attending the school. In other words, the benefits from creating rich social networks among parents can accrue to schools in poor neighborhoods, as well as in more affluent ones.

Parents can also help their children by having high expectations for their performance. Some of the studies of this issue are suspect, however, because they conflate the effects of parental prediction and parental ambition. The question, "What do you think your child's grade in math will be?" may simply be tracking the parents' knowledge of their child's likely performance, rather than the parents' goals for the child.

Nevertheless, some measures of parental expectations covary with specific actions that parents choose to take. According to one author, "data from the Beginning School Study show that parents who expect their child to do well in school are more likely than others to provide books and academic games, read to the child, and take the child to the library. These kinds of activities, at least for young children, are almost as easy for parents of limited means to do as they are for parents who are more affluent."[34] Encouraging parents to engage in these kinds of activities with their children seems like a reasonable effort, whatever interpretive difficulties the variable "parental expectations" may present.

Finally, some of the preschool demonstration projects used to argue for universal day care actually have elements that support the idea of working with parents, rather than using the

preschool as a substitute for care inside the family. The more sophisticated and lavishly funded of the early-intervention preschool programs intervene with parents as well as with children. Some have parent-education components, including home visits. Others have requirements that the parents contribute to the preschool program by doing activities such as being classroom aides, accompanying field trips or organizing resources in the classroom. In a variety of programs from Chicago, North Carolina, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Houston, the involvement of the parents exerted a beneficial influence on the outcome, independently of the activities of the preschool itself.[35] Given the mixed results of preschool and early intervention programs overall, we may well wonder whether the crucial variable of helping the family might be the most direct way to do lasting good for children.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Family relationships are important to the well-being of children, including their educational achievement. Changing the policy perspective from transferring resources to building the family adds a new twist to many current debates and brings some new policies into focus.

THE SCHOOL-CHOICE DEBATE

Emphasizing family involvement and family relationships adds a dimension to the school-choice debate. School-choice programs are likely to induce parents to become more involved with their children's education. A parent with a voucher is much less likely to simply go on autopilot and enroll her child in the nearest public school. For many parents, having a voucher in hand will be the first time they have had to think through the question of which school is best for their children. The current situation of little or no choice encourages parental passivity, which cannot be good for the relationship between the parents and childen.

In fact, encouraging parents to be more active on behalf of their children could be one of the features that shapes the details of a school-choice plan. Some choice plans require parents to specifically opt out of the public school system. Charter schools are an example of this. In principle, any parent can petition to start a charter school. In practice, however, it is so much easier to remain with the status quo that many parents continue to be complacent. All parents have a choice, but it is possible and quite a bit easier for parents to continue with the local public school. Most voucher plans, by contrast, allow the public schools as a choice but require every parent to make a specific decision to remain in, or opt out of, the neighborhood public school. The activation of the parents should be considered an advantage of such a program. Tax credit programs are somewhere in between charter schools and vouchers in terms of mobilizing parents. If a parent chooses a school that charges tuition, then the parent receives a tax credit. But the path of least resistance may very well be to stick with the familiar, tuition-free local public school.

No parental choice program can guarantee, of course, that parents will think the school decision through well or without error. But over time, parents themselves will begin to receive the feedback they need to make better decisions. The parents, who are the nearest to the children, will see whether the school is meeting their educational and other needs. The parent will have a greater incentive to monitor these situations more closely than they now do. Most people find it painful to gather a lot of information about a situation they have no power to control or change.

But more is at stake than being informed about education itself. Parents who are in command of this key decision in their child's life are learning to be more engaged with their children generally. Look at it this way: the current system requires parents to deposit their children with strangers for at least six hours a day, five days a week. Parents have very little, if any, influence over the content of the instruction, the identity of the instructor, the behavior of the peer group, or

the rules of the classroom. Parents are more or less required to acquiesce in whatever goes on in school. Is it any wonder that parents become passive?

CROWDING OUT THE FAMILY

Policymakers should ask themselves how their proposals will impact the relationships inside the family. The work that goes on inside the family is frequently subtle and intangible, often difficult to measure, or even to fully articulate. The tacit knowledge that families have of their own children will be difficult to replicate. This point is reminiscent of Hayek's critique of centrally planned economies and should have the same humbling influence. With this thought in mind, we should set more modest goals for public policy.

For example, day care enthusiasts hope that paid caregivers can substitute for the work that parents do with infants and preschoolers. Some studies show that some children, usually girls, benefit from the preschool experience. These studies track a couple of measurable indicators of things such as language development or cognitive skills.[36]

But, when other researchers attempt to study more subtle things such as children's behavior, or the quality of the attachment between children and their parents, the case for day care is not nearly so rosy.[37] There are complex interreactions between the quality of care and the sensitivity of the mother to her child. It appears that children of less sensitive or less responsive mothers are at higher risk for being insecurely attached to their mothers. This risk is greater if these children are in low quality, rather than high quality, day care. That is, high quality care out of the home seems to buffer some of the effects of maternal insensitivity. But, perhaps surprisingly, these same children are more likely to be insecurely attached, the more hours they spend in out-of-home day care. Researchers hypothesize that these children need more time with their mothers "to develop the internalized sense that their mothers are responsive and available to them."[38]

Studies tracking children as they mature through the preschool years give reason to believe that day care children become more aggressive. Children in nonmaternal care during their first year of life do not necessarily behave differently during that year. But the children cared for outside the home in their first year are more likely to be aggressive during the second and possibly later years as well.[39] The researchers do not have a complete explanation for what they have observed. But the fact that they cannot completely explain it illustrates how complex the developmental process really is, and cautions us about visionary schemes for completely replacing maternal care.

Finally, studies of day care consistently show that higher quality day care produces outcomes superior to those of lower quality day care. The impact of low-quality day care is particularly pronounced when the mother is less sensitive or responsive to her child. It seems reasonable to suppose that lower income families purchase lower quality child care, on average, simply because of their budget constraints. Yet no study that I have seen shows a consistent relationship between maternal insensitivity and income. The children of the poor might very well benefit more from increased time with their mothers than from more time in low quality day care. If so, the policy focus should shift away from increasing the quality of day care to increasing the ability of lower income families to keep one adult at home to care for the children. Increased tax credits specifically targeted to lower income families could be one way of accomplishing this.

The proposal for universal school breakfasts offers another example of a policy that will have subtle effects on the family. Advocates are counting on stressed-out, over-worked, two-earner couples to offer political support for extending a program that now serves only the financially indigent. The public argument focuses on the benefits of guaranteeing that every child begins the school day with a nutritious breakfast. But it is not difficult to see the subtext: providing breakfast at school will be convenient for all parents, especially working parents.

Even the most highly paid families could be persuaded by the convenience, which is the real selling point of the program.

But we are losing something important, though intangible, when we put comfort first. Eating meals together is one of the focal points of family life. People talk to each other. People share. The family members get some time together. Children see their parents as people who provide nourishment to them. Children learn table manners. Even at breakfast, when people may be eating in shifts, family members have the opportunity for some time together. It is unrealistic to believe that the only thing that goes on during a meal is the ingestion of calories.

Critics may respond that this is an idealized picture. People are too busy to eat together. Children are too disrespectful and jaded to sit still through a family meal. Besides, breakfast isn't the place for that kind of family unity. Dinner is the time when most families do that kind of bonding. Many families have even given up on eating dinner together. Breakfast can easily fall between the cracks.

Kids missing breakfast once in a while is no big deal. But if it happens habitually, most families see that something is wrong. Every family approaches this kind of problem differently, because every family has a little bit different story and different priorities. Some people work out new car pools or transportation arrangements. For some families, the main problem is how to get some of the family members closer to home. Some families are able to reduce the working hours of one adult, so that at least one person has the time to keep the home front running more smoothly. Other families decide that keeping one of the adults at home is the highest priority.

A universal school-breakfast program enables people to avoid this entire line of reflection and problem-solving. The federal government, using the local public schools, would be subsidizing people at their most chaotic. Besides, not every family has two earners and two kids dashing madly out the door without breakfast. A great many families have put some time and effort into making sure its members eat in some sem-

blance of peace and order. Those families would probably end up using the school-breakfast program, if it were low cost enough and handy enough, just as most families now use the subsidized school-lunch program. The convenience of the program, which is a selling point for the stressed-out family, will disrupt and displace the efforts of the conscientious family.

POLICIES THAT ENCOURAGE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

This brings up another whole realm of possible policies that are not even being discussed: policies that build family involvement with children, specifically in their lives at school. I recall from my childhood that my little parochial school served a hot lunch. The kitchen staff consisted of two employees and a rotating team of four parent volunteers. Once a month, my mom and three of her friends from our neighborhood helped serve lunch at school. I cannot claim that her monthly presence improved my academic achievement. But it surely increased the likelihood that she knew what was going on with me at school. And from the children's point of view, what a delight it was for all of us, to see our mothers behind the cafeteria line!

This was not a parish filled with wealthy or sophisticated people. These were working-class families, who struggled to make ends meet. Somehow, those working-class mothers managed to get us off to school with breakfast in our stomachs. Somehow, our school principal and parish priest induced them to contribute to the good of the community by showing up once a month to help in the cafeteria.

Many non-public schools have parental participation as a requirement of a child's attendance. Whether it is a cooperative preschool run in a church basement, or an elite prep school, many schools rely on various kinds of inputs from parents. Sometimes, parents do mundane things like helping repair and maintain school property. Other parents

are involved directly in the classroom, as teachers' aides, as tutors for particular children, or instructors in specialized subjects. Virtually all private schools engage the assistance of parents in fund-raising activities. Some fund-raising activities are strictly financial affairs, such as capital campaign drives, whereas others are real community-building enterprises. Most schools are well aware that their bake sales and festivals and spaghetti dinners build up an esprit de corps that has spillover benefits to the school.

Public schools currently use parent volunteers only on a sporadic basis. Sometimes the call for volunteers is perfunctory. Whether the parents who volunteer are fully utilized depends on the temperament of the particular teacher. Teachers are not really trained to engage the parents or use them effectively.

Local public schools could begin to experiment with parental participation requirements. Many schools now require parents to sign their children's homework folder in order for the child to get full credit for doing the homework. This is, obviously, a very minimal requirement for parental supervision and involvement. But it is something, and it should be expanded upon. Many public schools ask parents to help with fund-raising, but with little else. Certainly, few public schools have a role for parents in the ordinary work of the school or in the choice of curriculum. Schools could require parents to contribute a certain number of volunteer hours and make a variety of times available to accommodate different schedules. Schools could require parents to come in to the school to pick up their child's report card.

Some schools might find a role for parents as mentors to other parents. Teachers are often aware that a child has some problem at home, or that the child would benefit from some particular help from his parents. It isn't unusual for the teacher to find it awkward to approach the parent to tell him the child needs help. Sometimes a parent would respond differently to encouragement from another parent than from the teacher or other authority figure. This may be the kind of

"social capital" that some of the previously cited studies captured. The network of parental friends and acquaintances within the school makes it more natural for parents to receive moderately "bad news" about their children, before it turns into disastrous news.

Any policies that keep the parents coming and going to the school on a regular basis are beneficial in this regard. Something as simple as having a place for parents to chat while they wait to pick up their kids after school could build up friendships among parents.

FAMILY POLICY IS EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The final policy implication of placing relationships before resources is that we must evaluate policies, that affect the family differently than we now do. Policies that affect the family are educational policies whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not. A variety of policies have been advocated to help reduce the incidence of divorce and to restore public understanding of the importance of married-couple families. Some of these policies are modest, such as creating a public health campaign to inform people about the long-term benefits of marriage and the risks associated with divorce. Others are more ambitious, such as ending no-fault divorce for couples with children under 18, or providing a one-time tax credit to always-married couples when their youngest children reach eighteen.[40] In any case, the positive impact of married-couple families on the educational outcomes of their children needs to be considered as one of the benefits of any and all proposals that affect the family.

CONCLUSION

This, then, is the conflict of visions. Is the primary function of the family transferring resources from big people to little people? Or is the primary function of the family building

relationships between mother, father, and children? The answers to these questions set the stage for a whole range of policy choices.

Free societies work well because they harness more of the efforts of more ordinary people than any social system that has yet been devised. Free economic systems work well because they harness the information that ordinary people have about their particular, localized circumstances, as Hayek argued so long ago. At the same time, free economic systems harness the motivations of more ordinary people than can a centrally planned system. More people will work harder, and more effectively, when they are pursuing their own good, and the good of their families, than they will if authorities are trying to force them all to contribute to some grand master plan.

Involving parents more heavily in their children's education should be the first priority for educational policy. The parents have both the knowledge and the motivation to do what is best for their own children. Being in a relationship with the parents is more important to the child's development than the transfers of resources that educational policy is in a position to make. Moreover, we need to be mindful that government or schools can undermine the family, by replacing its functions, by inducing parental passivity, or by actively attacking the family's values.

America needs to re-moralize the family in order to revitalize the school. First, we should drop the posture of agnostic neutrality about family types. We should stop implicitly encouraging family-types and behaviors that are destructive to children and ultimately costly to the educational system. We have had a generation or more of social experimentation and the results are in. Second, we should renew our appreciation of the relational quality of the family. We will come to have more modest expectations from public policy overall. But, we will become more impressed by the contributions that ordinary people of modest means can make to the well-being of their own children.

NOTES

1. "Superior Day Care Linked to Higher Adult Achievement," *San Jose Mercury News*, Oct. 22, 1999; "Study: Intensive, Early Education Has Long-lasting Results," Associated Press, Oct. 21, 1999; Jennifer Roback Morse, "Government Nannies," *Forbes*, March 6, 2000; "The War on Mom," Ben Boychuck and Matthew Robinson, *Washington Times*, June 2, 2000; "Child Care for Cutting Off Crime?" Benjamin P. Tyree, *Washington Times*, June 1, 2000.
2. "SR Part of Breakfast Study," *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, May 17, 2000: B-1, 2.
3. "Brave New Schools: Home Education Banned in Berkeley?" *World Net Daily*, June 3, 2000; http://www.worldnetdaily.com/bluesky_fosterj_news/20000603_xnfoj_home_educa.shtml Cathy Cuthbert (California Homeschool Network), "Berkeley's Crusade: Educrats Target Home Schoolers with Truancy Suits," *Investor's Business Daily*, June 20, 2000. (Summarized in National Center for Policy Analysis, *News Digest*, June 21, 2000.)
4. Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, The Deception, The Dogmas* (New York: The Free Press, 1993): 36–38.
5. Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn't Work* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2001), shows that free societies depend on the strength of these early trust relationships. The smooth functioning of a market economy and a self-governing political order require a large percentage of the population to trust and be trustworthy.
6. This syndrome is known as the Kaspar Hauser syndrome, or psychosocial dwarfism. See Harold I. Kaplan, M.D. and Benjamin J. Sadock, M.D., eds., *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*/VI, vol. 2, sixth edition (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins), Chapter 40 and sections 43.3, 47.3.
7. A. Jean Ayres, *Sensory Integration and the Child* (Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services, 1979) and *Sensory Integration and Learning Disorders* (Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services, 1973). One expert likens a disorganized flow of sensations to life in a rush-hour traffic jam. A child who cannot organize incoming sensory information is frequently overwhelmed, especially by noise and touch.
8. "Central Auditory Processing Disorder," *The Post, The Newsletter of the Parent Network for the Post-Institutionalized Child*, Spring 1995: 5–6.

9. Gale Haradon, "Sensory Integration Therapy and Children from Deprivational Environments," in Thais Tepper, Lois Hannon and Dorothy Sandstrom, eds, *International Adoption: Challenges and Opportunities* (Meadow Lands, PA: Parent Network for the Post-Institutionalized Child, 1999): 89–92.
10. See Ayres general. See also Carol Stock Kronowitz, "Catching Preschoolers Before They Fall: A Developmental Screening," *Child Care Information Exchange*, March 1992, 25–29.
11. Gale Haradon, "Sensory Integration Therapy and Children from Deprivational Environments," in Tepper, Hannon, and Sandstrom, eds., *International Adoption* (Meadow Lands, PA: Parent Network for the Post-Institutionalized Child, 1999): 89–92.
12. See Ayres, both works cited.
13. Frederick A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945): 519–30; *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
14. For the reader interested in an overview of the data and the issues, two good general sources are David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), and Patrick F. Fagan and Robert Rector, "The Effects of Divorce on America," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 1373, Washington, D.C., June 5, 2000.
15. Sara McLanahan and Karen Booth, "Mother-Only Families: Problems, Prospects and Politics," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51, no. 3 (August 1989): 557–80, reviews the relevant literature. Irwin Garfinkel and Sara S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1986) pages 30–31 cites research showing that daughters of single parents are 53 percent more likely to marry as teenagers, 111 percent more likely to have children as teenagers, 164 percent more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92 percent more likely to dissolve their own marriages. Their Chapter 2, "Problems of Mother-Only Families," offers a succint summary of the problems. See also David Blankenhorn, *op. cit.* Chapter 2, "Fatherless Society."
16. McLanahan and Booth, *op. cit.*
17. A comprehensive study performed on 1988 data found that children raised in disrupted or never-married families are at increased risk of academic and behavioral problems, in comparison with children in intact families with both biological parents present. Deborah A. Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview

Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (August 1991): 573–84. Similar results were found by Judith S. Wallerstein, Shauna B. Corbin, and Julia M. Lewis, "Children of Divorce: A 10-Year Study," in E. Mavis Hetherington and Josephine D. Arasteh, *Impact of Divorce, Single Parenting and Stepparenting on Children* (Hillsdale: NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988): 197–214. This is a follow-up study of fifty-two couples and their children who had been divorced ten years previously. Among those who had been latent and adolescent at the time of divorce (now 19–29), only two-thirds were in college or had graduated from college or were seeking advanced degrees. (The national norm is that 85 percent of high school grads go directly to college.) The authors note that this may be due to an abrupt end to child-support payments at age 18.

18. Suet-Ling Pong, "Family Structure, School Context, and Eighth Grade Math and Reading Achievement," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (August 1997): 734–46.
19. Dawson, *op. cit.*
20. Nicholas Zill, "Behavior, Achievement and Health Problems Among Children in Stepfamilies: Findings from a National Survey of Child Health," in Hetherington and Arasteh, *op. cit.,* 325–68.
21. Dawson, *op. cit.*
22. Frank L. Mott, Lori Kowalski-Jones, and Elizabeth Menaghen, "Paternal Absence and Child Behavior: Does a Child's Gender Make a Difference?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (February 1997): 103–18.
23. One might wonder whether the causation runs in the other direction. That is, instead of a child having problems because his father is uninvolved, perhaps the father has withdrawn from a child who already has problems. It is easy to imagine this scenario in a stepfamily, in which a resentful child refuses to accept the new parent, and the adult withdraws in frustration. However, the interpretation that father involvement, per se, is important is supported by the wide-ranging evidence on completely or mostly absent fathers.
24. Paul R. Amato and Fernando Rivera, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (May 1999): 375–84.
25. Elizabeth C. Cooksey and Michelle M. Fondell, "Spending Time With His Kids: Effects of Family Structure on Fathers' and Children's Lives," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (August 1996): 693–707. For pre-teens, there was a statistically significant negative impact on grades of living in a single-father household,

or living with a step-father who has biological children living in the same household. For teens, the statistically significant negative impact came from living either in a single-father household, or in a household with a step-father who does not have biological children in the household.

26. Bogenschneider, Karen, "Parental Involvement in Adolescent Schooling: A Proximal Process with Transcontextual Validity," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (August 1997): 718–33.
27. Ibid., 725, 728.
28. Ibid., 731. The full citations for the works cited by Bogenschneider are C. Simich-Dudgeon, "Increasing Student Achievement through Teacher Knowledge about Parent Involvement," in N.F. Chavkin, ed. *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993): 189–203 and M.B. Smith, "School and Home: Focus on Achievement," in A.H. Passow, ed., *Developing Programs for the Educationally Disadvantaged* (New York: Teachers College Press): 87–107.
29. Pong, *op. cit.*
30. James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 95–S120.
31. This is conceptual framework used in N.M. Astone and S.S. McLanahan, "Family Structure, Parental Practices, and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review* (1991): 309–20. Obviously, this characterization is consistent with the major argument of the present paper.
32. James S. Coleman and T. B. Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
33. Pong, *op. cit.*
34. Doris R. Entwisle and Karl L. Alexander, "Family Type and Children's Growth in Reading and Math over the Primary Grades," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (May 1996): 341–55.
35. Patricia Morgan, *Who Needs Parents? The Effects of Childcare and Early Education on Children in Britain and the USA* (London: The Institute for Economic Affairs, 1996): 69, 79, and especially the Appendix, "Working Through Parents," 128–29.
36. Frank. L. Mott, "Developmental Effects of Infant Care: The Mediating Role of Gender and Health," *Journal of Social Issues* 47, no. 2 (1991): 139–58. Also see Judith L. Rubenstein and Carollee Howes, "Social-Emotional Development of Toddlers in Day Care: The Role of Peers and of Individual Differences," in Sally Kilmer, ed., *Advances in Early Education and Day Care* (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1983): 13–46.
37. Peter Barglow, Brian E. Vaughn, and Nancy Molitor, "Effects of

Maternal Absence Due to Employment on the Quality of Infant-Mother Attachment in a Low-Risk Sample," *Child Development* 58 (1987): 945–54. Jay Belsky and Michael J. Rovine, "Non-Maternal Care in the First Year of Life and the Security of Infant-Parent Attachment," *Child Development* 59 (1988): 157–67. Belsky and David Eggebeen, "Early and Extensive Maternal Employment and Young Children's Socioemotional Development: Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991): 1083–110.

38. The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, "The Effects of Infant Child Care on Infant-Mother Attachment Security: Results of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care," *Child Development* 68, no. 5 (October 1997): 860–79. Quote from p. 876.
39. Jay Belsky, Sharon Woodworth, and Keith Crnic, "Trouble in the Second Year: Three Questions about Family Interaction," *Child Development* 67 (1996): 556–78. Also see the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, "Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance, and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months," *Child Development* 69, no. 4 (August 1998): 1145–70.
40. Patrick F. Fagan and Robert Rector, "The Effects of Divorce on America," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 1373, Washington, D.C., June 5, 2000.