



The Challenged
American Family

What Should We Do?

A Community Dialogue

REPORT
JULY 30, 2015

Why we need to talk about this issue

Few people would argue that the American family was in perfect shape. The structure and dynamics of traditional marriage are changing. Families are increasingly redefined. More children are raised by grandparents, foster parents and single parents. Many are locked into a cycle of poverty.

So when 139 concerned citizens assembled at Owensboro's RiverPark Center to examine various unsettling social conditions and trends on July 30, 2015, participants had a lot to discuss. And although reasonable people often disagreed, a consensus on key issues emerged.



Common concerns

Many participants agreed that in far too many cases, parents (particularly fathers) have abandoned their responsibility as parents. And too many children are born out of wedlock, even though more women are waiting to have a child later, often on their own without a husband.

“...too many parents (particularly fathers) have abandoned their responsibilities as parents.”

It is also apparent that many parents do not have parenting skills. Broader community collaboration is needed to address these concerns, including volunteers, government, corporations, and foundations.

Since 1965, divorce rates have doubled. More couples are delaying or skipping marriage. In 1960, just five percent of children were born outside of marriage; now that percentage is 41 percent. Single parenthood increases the likelihood children will be born into poverty and more than 40 percent will remain there the rest of their lives.

In short, local citizens felt that the magnitude of the problems meant that families cannot do it alone.

A direction forward

Even more critically, participants agreed on action steps that could begin to address the problems of the American family right here in the Owensboro area:

- Continue conversations on these issues in churches, community centers and more. This is a community challenge.
- Strive to reduce generational poverty one family at a time.
- Teach parenting skills and financial literacy.
- Increase and improve high-quality childcare and early childhood education.
- Recruit and train volunteers to assist in a coordinated effort to address these concerns.
- Develop a mentoring program to assist in these efforts.
- Get each committed individual to select one thing they would do to help. Problems may not be solved nationally, but individuals and families can be helped one at a time. And that will make a difference.

The process

So how did a diverse group of citizens come to these conclusions? And where did they disagree along the way? These details are important because this is not just a story about how the American family can be saved. It is also a story about bringing together people with varied backgrounds, varied beliefs, and varied opinions and marshaling these diverse voices into a unified movement.

In other words, this is also a story about the process we need to move toward concrete solutions. So let's take a look at the process of this event. Ask yourself here, do you agree with the participants? Where do you disagree? And what points would you have added if you had been there?

Who participated?

The Lawrence and Augusta Hager Educational Foundation, Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, 14 sponsors and more than 30 volunteers organized the "The Challenged American Family" community dialogue. Participants convened around 15 tables, each with a trained facilitator and recorder. KET's Bill Goodman was the program moderator.

Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTV) also taped the event for rebroadcast on the college's public access channel.

The event was open to the public, but a focused effort was made to attract participants who matched the demographic profile of our community, particularly through an outreach effort to churches that serve low-income areas of our community.

Participants were generally middle-aged or seniors. Approximately 56 percent were female; 44 percent were male. Most were from traditional families. Racial and ethnic minorities were represented and reflective of the population. Theological diversity was also evident



in the views expressed at the forum.

A few single mothers or those who had been single mothers attended, as did residents from public housing facilities. Some had stayed home to raise their children. Regrettably, the rural community was not fully represented.

Materials used

Each participant received an issue brief/dialogue guide and a "pre-test" to gain a sense of where participants stood on many of the issues prior to the forum. Following the dialogue, recorders completed a "Recorder Response" form to help determine if participants changed their views or gained a greater understanding and respect for those who disagree.

Format

Moderator Bill Goodman reviewed the issue brief that laid out three possible alternatives to addressing the family crisis:

- Reinforce time-tested values.
- Promote personal responsibility
- Expand social responsibility.

Goodman also shared stories about the importance of family in his formative years.



Participants then engaged in dialogue for 90 minutes – 30 minutes devoted to each option.

The exercise was not structured as a debate, but rather a deliberative dialogue to gain a richer point of view and respect for those who may have a different point of view – all in an effort to identify common ground for action. Here's what each stage of the public deliberation revealed.

Pre-Test Summary

Ninety participants completed the 14-question “pre-test.” Their answers offered some interesting and insightful responses. On some measures, the group was evenly divided.

- Participants were split on whether government should encourage marriage and two-parent families.
- Slightly more than half of the participants believed in teaching abstinence and eliminating policies that encourage births to non-married parents.
- Participants split on whether divorce laws should be liberalized.

On other issues, a clear majority favored one perspective.

- Many thought parents should limit their children to what they can afford.
- Free and affordable comprehensive family planning services was strongly supported.
- By a margin of 58 to 34 percent, participants felt society has no right to limit the ability of poor people to have children.
- Less than half (38 percent) believed that certain contraceptives are intrusive and contribute to permissiveness.
- By more than a two-to-one margin, participants agreed that morals and values are in decline.

Finally, for a significant number of issues, the group was (largely) united.

- The vital importance of marriage was expressed by nearly 89 percent.
- By about a four-to-one margin, participants thought communities should establish local standards of decency.
- Eighty percent of participants support tax policies that help married couples.
- More than 80 percent said single parenthood is here to stay and that society should assist these families even more.
- The strongest recommendation (nine out of ten) was to substantially increase government support for childcare, preschool, K-12 and after-school programs.
- However, by nearly two-to-one, increased public welfare spending for unmarried mothers was believed to lead to irresponsible behavior.

Dialogue Summary

For 90 minutes, participants discussed the values (and weaknesses) of the three options. Here's a flavor of those conversations.

Option 1: Reinforce Time-Tested Values



Most participants believe in marriage and the value of traditional two-parent families, including the importance of the father. Supporters of this view could summarize their position clearly: “Strong families build strong communities.” A responsible mother and father bring important support: additional income, an opportunity to continue education, savings on childcare and more. These benefits lose their value when a home environment is without nurturing or when spouses quarrel.

“Strong families build strong communities.”

That said, participants had clear differences of opinion with regard to an expanded role of government to meet the special needs of single-parent families. Some participants feel that government should not create or define marriage. However, others acknowledge that children should be protected since they are not responsible for their circumstances.

“...government should not create or define marriage.”

Supporters of this option often felt that “welfare needs to change” and that more children means more federal money. Those who keep having babies should be cut off welfare.

Participants recognized that children living alternately with divorced parents often provide a loving environment; but often the tension between parents can carry over to the child/children.

Participants discussed the need to instill values in the home, and how the pace of modern life reduces the value and amount of quality time between children and parents.



The value of education and learning is also an important value that most participants appeared to acknowledge. Instilling respect for others in children was also advocated.

“...strong support for sex education in addition to abstinence and birth control is surprising. However, there was very little discussion about same sex relationships, marriages and adoptions by LGBT couples.”

Given the conservative leanings in our community, strong support for sex education in addition to abstinence and birth control is surprising. However, there was very little discussion about same sex relationships, marriages and adoptions by LGBT couples. And some pointed to research (undefined) that sex education does not reduce teen pregnancy.

According to participants, many are influenced by what they see on television: blended families, single parents

and others. But these lifestyles are not as easy as they are portrayed. Many children and families are “mother-led.” Child rearing is difficult and expensive. That’s why many saw the need to educate youth about the consequences of their actions.

Churches and community groups were also challenged to “step up” and get involved in these issues. Mentors might also play an important role.

Option 2: Promote Responsibility



Promoting personal responsibility sounds good. But it’s often easier to locate the problems than to find the solutions.

The list of problems participants identified is long.

- We live in a society when many people are choosing not to get married. For many people, the marriage age has been pushed back. And many marriages end in divorce.
- When that happens, fathers often default on their responsibility. (More than 5,000 fathers in Daviess County are behind in their child support.)

“...more than 5,000 fathers in Daviess County are behind in their child support.”

- Drugs and alcohol intensify any family problems.

- The system has a built-in bias for parents with means. The courts do not seem to value the natural parent. Poor children can be taken away which can lead to trauma.
- Too many low- and middle-income parents are just getting by, living paycheck to paycheck. The cost of a child adds to that pressure.

“...people don’t have time to parent when they work two-three jobs.”

- Children from dysfunctional families may find that school is a better family for many students than the family itself.

So how do we teach parents to be more responsible?

Participants wanted to encourage traditional marriage. Divorce is too easy.

Some think contraception should be available to everyone.

Parents have the responsibility to be self-sufficient before they become parents. Some parents need more support, but they also need to know that there are consequences for their actions. Too many are just getting by.

And they need to teach responsibility to their children on tough issues like sexual behavior without relying on the schools.

Most participants thought a parent should be able to leave an abusive relationship, but it is difficult to judge when parents are responsible. We cannot pass legislation to require responsibility.

Parents can be more effective with early intervention. When you bring children into the world, it is your responsibility to provide for them.

“When you bring children into the world it is your responsibility to provide for them.”

For many who see personal responsibility as critical, government programs such as SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, etc. and others are not long-term solutions.

Others felt we need to take advantage of existing programs, such as the one sponsored by the NFL.



Many players grew up without a father in the home. These could be effective role models, though that takes a team effort: parents, families, schools, mentors and more. And that insight brings us to the third option: social responsibility.

“Parents have the responsibility to talk to their children about sex and not rely on schools... parents have the responsibility to be self-sufficient before they have children.”

Option 3: Expand Societal Responsibility



In today's schools, teachers are expected to do more and more. It is increasingly difficult to squeeze in all the courses and activities now expected of the schools. Moreover, schools cannot raise children.

It takes more than teachers. It takes the community.

It takes higher expectations. It takes a village to raise children and instill values that will guide them through their life.

A community, a society, can be the voice for children. This value, this role, is not reflected in the level of funding that is allocated to education and youth causes. We place a higher priority on golf courses than agencies that serve children.

“We place a higher priority on golf courses than agencies that serve children.”

To expand our social responsibilities, parents need the help of corporations, foundations, governments, public agencies and institutions, private nonprofits, churches



and more. Single parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, foster parents and others need extra help so families can be self-sustaining.

Quality childcare is essential. There needs to be more opportunities for women in the workplace to meet the needs and obligations of child rearing.

Final thoughts

The groups could not always agree – for example, on the definition of family or the meaning of values that should characterize our community. These are complicated issues.

It is difficult for some people to accept that values have changed over the years. And many do not feel that government should force people to change.

But participants agreed that the responsibility of the parent is to care/nurture. The government and community can step in and provide assistance when

needed, although some participants were against a government role of any kind.

“...some participants were against a government role of any kind.”

The size and complexity of these issues increases the challenges. The message from the media can undermine efforts and reduce dialogue. Engaging in talk isn't realistic when people work two-three jobs and don't have time to parent.

To continue as we are now doing to address these options, we will likely continue to produce the same outcomes.

“Many would accept additional investments in education to give a boost to struggling families.”

Despite the disagreements, this exercise reinforced the value of group communications. It is most important to open ourselves to other ways of thinking. We must be honest with one another and be willing to compromise and sacrifice for the common good to help families that are hurting.

“I feel expanded... I haven't changed a whole lot, but I've learned a lot.”

And the participants also left with a clear consensus on key directions to move if we are to rescue the American family in the Owensboro area. That's a good start.

Advisory Committee

Belinda Abell

Impact Marketing Consultants

Ed Allen

Retired educator

Barbara Bennett

Editor, Poet

Rodney Berry

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

Sylvia Coleman

Owensboro Human Relations Commission

Fred May

U.S. Bank

Keith Sanders

Lawrence and Augusta Hager Educational Foundation

Facilitators

Ed Allen

Rodney Berry

Martha Clark

David Clark

Bob Darling

Aloma Dew

Angie Ditch

Chad Gesser

Clay Horton

Pat McKeegan

Kathy Oliver

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Ray Roth

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