

This book chapter touches on areas of life that are *extremely* sensitive and *very* hard for many people to talk about. But they are of utmost importance to the future well-being of children, families, communities and nations.

Every week we are becoming more aware that the revolution in sexual relationships is wrecking children's lives as well as those of adults, confirmed by yet more research.

We are recognising that love between parents or lack of it can greatly affect child development and emotional health.

Children don't usually just sail through parental conflict, separation, divorce, and remarriage.

There are often lasting consequences - just talk to older children, young adults or those in later life about what the impact on them personally.

Children are affected by single parenting too and step-parenting has often turned out to be a poor substitute for a missing father or mother.

These are intensely personal issues, that can be very painful to discuss, because we all want the very best for our own children.

It can be very hurtful and upsetting to think that our own actions, decisions, choices and adult relationships may have caused anguish or even deep emotional scars in our children.

Of course, we cannot change our own history, and relationships fall apart for many complex reasons, but we do need to consider the wider impacts of these major social trends, and ask ourselves what steps can be taken, to help mitigate some of these impacts.

The changes in parenting have certainly been dramatic over a generation. In America more than a third of all babies are now born outside marriage , as in the UK.

The trouble is that it can take at least a generation to fully understand the full impact on an entire cohort of children as they grow up into young adults and later life.

In Australia the figure is lower, one in five by 1986. Half the children born in America between 1970 and 1984 will have spent time in a mother-only family, and half of these are expected to acquire a step-parent by the age of sixteen.

In Britain at any time there are 1.3 million single parents looking after 2.2 million children. The proportion of single parents is three times that in Spain or Italy, six times that in Greece, as attitudes have become more accepting, yet British adults continue to worry about the children.

Traditional parenting still seen as an ideal

In 1993 almost six out of ten said children needed a home with both their mother and their father to grow up happily and four out of ten said a single mother could not bring up her child as well as a married couple.

The two parent family remains a strongly held ideal. In other European nations such as Italy or Spain, with more traditional families, the two parent ideal is even stronger. The same survey found only 35% were happy about unmarried people having children.

The director of the UK National Council for One-Parent Families said: "Clearly people do still believe that two parents who are loving and supportive are the best for children, but they have recognised that where this is not feasible, women can manage quite well alone and can be extremely good parents."

The reason there is such a drive to recognise the needs of single parents is because bringing up children on your own can be a real struggle and without help, children can suffer.

Either we say single parenting does not cause any problems, so single parent families can be treated just the same as all others without risk to adults or children; or we say single parents face many difficulties, the model is inadequate so the state needs to step in to help fill the gaps, mainly for the sake of the children involved. The truth may lie between the two: some single parents need more support than others, but single parenting can be very tough.

marriage may be better than divorce" class="gcbasicbold">Bad marriage may be better than divorce

It was common in the past for couples to stay together "for the sake of the children". This attitude changed during the 1970s and 1980s to "better a good divorce than a bad marriage". Three out of four British adults in 1986 said one partner ceasing to love the other was sufficient reason for divorce. By 1993 only one in three British women said they would stay in an unhappy relationship for the children's sake.

Perhaps the change has come out of an emphasis on personal fulfilment. Perhaps it was because of the influence of psychiatrist philosophers like Dr R.D. Laing, who were very negative about the whole concept of family, or people like psychologist David Cooper who wrote "Death of the Family" some two decades ago.

Perhaps it was influenced by first results from the National Child Development Study which started in 1958, suggesting pre-divorce quarrelling was the major source of damage to children, so it might be best for them if unhappy couples separated quickly. That finding is now being questioned after further analysis.

There is now strong evidence that living in an unhappy marriage may be far better for children than separation or divorce. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded important research by Dr John Tripp and Monica Cockett at Exeter University. Their preliminary findings were very disturbing and made headlines in February 1994.

They looked at what happened to a carefully matched sample of 152 children aged nine to ten and thirteen to fourteen. Half of their families had broken up one or more times.

Divorce wrecks children emotionally

They found children from broken families were twice as likely to have problems with emotional and physical health, behaviour and attainment at school. They were also more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and have difficulties in friendships. They were four times as likely to suffer stress related health problems such as headaches, bed-wetting, or stomach aches, "feeling sick", not wanting to go to school or just "feeling miserable".

Those in step-families did even worse, six times as likely to have these problems. Children whose families broke up more than once did worst of all, eight times more likely to suffer from psychosomatic illness, to need help at school or referral to an educational psychologist and ten times as likely to be badly behaved.

Children from divorced families were four times as likely to need to see a psychiatrist. Perhaps this is part of the reason why the number of teenagers and children admitted to British psychiatric hospitals with serious mental illness has increased by almost 25% in five years from 1986 to 1991.

Admissions among children under the age of ten doubled from 707 to 1,400. In those aged ten to fourteen the numbers rose from 1,077 to 1,600. Part of the rise has been blamed on the lack of proper community psychiatric support, but others believe marriage breakdown is also a major factor.

Children may be happier for parents to quarrel

Constant fighting between parents had less adverse effects than parental separation, the end result on children was closer to that in "happy" families.

These are very serious findings which demand an urgent rethink about long term commitment in relationships before people get pregnant and have children. Dr Tripp is very clear that neither poverty nor conflict had caused the damage: It was the loss of a parent:

"What parents don't realise is that while they may have problems with each other, the children

often have good relationships with both parents - and they lose that when the family breaks up. In addition the separation often did not end the conflict." In some cases the conflict was made worse because children were drawn into it for the first time.

Three out of four non-custodial parents said after putting their children through all this they now wished they had never divorced.

We need to get this message through to every family where parents are in difficulties. Separation is likely to significantly damage your children and looking back you may regret what you have done and wish you had tried a little harder to work it out, especially when you wake up to realise the price your children have paid.

Although the Exeter study made big headlines in the UK, another lesser known British study of 111 families in Edinburgh by Dr Ann Mitchell found similar things almost a decade earlier. She also found children prefer parents to stay together, even if they argue and fight. Her work was based on interviews of teenagers and their custodial parents five years after divorce. Children have such a powerful sense of belonging, linked to their own search for love. Children are also creatures of habit, as any child psychologist or parent knows, responding to routine, familiarity and disliking change.

Children were sometimes included in discussions about which parent they lived with, but the tables were often stacked by a previous decision about who was going to keep the family home. It was rare for children to be able to choose to go on living in the same place with whoever they wanted.

Moving to relatives' homes almost always resulted in overcrowding. Sometimes the whole family would be crammed into one room, with shifts for cooking or eating meals. Some mothers had returned with the children to the family home to find everything gone: in one case all the furniture, in another the toys, or all the plants in the garden.

One in four had moved home three or four times. One girl had moved at least six times with her mother and ten times with her father. She was very sad she had never managed to stay long enough to make any friends. Schooling had been severely disrupted.

Children have to grow up and "make do"

The children often landed up with adult responsibilities, "covering" for an absent parent. Cooking, washing up, laundry, maintenance, babysitting, gardening, decorating, shopping. They grew up prematurely because they had to.

Poverty was common. Maintenance disputes strained many relationships. Some women were convinced that former husbands were deliberately not getting work to avoid maintenance. One mother said every time she went to see her solicitor her ex-husband went back on the dole.

Very few talked to their children about what was going on in much detail. Children often turned to grandmothers and grandfathers for comfort because they were well known, well loved, in the situation yet out of it. They were also more available. Parents often seemed to deny that their children had many feelings about the divorce. Eight parents mentioned truancy and other behaviour problems which they felt were due to the divorce but blamed it all on the other parent.

Eight parents remembered that their children were more clinging after separation, while others said that their children were withdrawn. Some reported bed-wetting, aggressive behaviour, school problems and nightmares - although sometimes the latter had settled after separation.

Children were often very upset. They had often hidden their distress, crying alone in their rooms at night, sobbing at school, or when their parents were out. Many tried very hard to protect their parents from seeing their pain. Some children were furious with the parent they blamed for breaking up the home. Feelings of rejection were commonly felt by the children, usually by the same-sex parent.

Surprised, embarrassed but rarely relieved

Some were surprised by the separation. Other were embarrassed with friends. Although divorce rates are rising, most marriages remain intact, eight out of ten children live with a married couple and most children don't want to be different. Therefore the fact that their parents are divorced may be hidden by them from all except their closest friends.

The only children relieved by the divorce (7 out of 111) had fathers with severe alcohol addiction, or whose behaviour was bizarre in some way. One was relieved when his mother divorced a stepfather he disliked.

Only five said that they were unhappy before their parents divorced. Only half remembered any parental conflict. They had responded in various ways: telling their parents to stop arguing, running out of the house, hiding under the bedclothes unable to sleep, or bursting into tears in the same room - which was often the most effective.

Half the children had wanted reconciliation to take place, some clinging to hope five years later. None of the children blamed themselves - this is something younger children can feel, but rarely teenagers. The worst result of separation was that they felt they did not see one parent often enough - if at all. The next worst was being shunted around from place to place, followed by shortage of money.

Access was difficult, even when arrangements worked well - and they often failed to with disagreements or parents letting each other down. When they happened, access visits were often tedious or expensive or both. Mothers often took children to the shops or a cafe. Fathers more often chose a film, football matches or swimming. Fathers more often had a car which helped.

The trouble is that there is no adequate substitute for parents and children enjoying living together in the same home, wandering in and out of each other's company in an informal and relaxed way. Some children actually scorned amounts lavished on them during visits by an estranged parent. "He tried to buy our affection". Five years after divorce, only one in ten enjoyed a warm relationship with an absent parent. Only one in four living with their mothers had stayed overnight in their father's home. No child living with a father had ever slept in a mother's new home.

Parents were often very curious about their ex-partners, gently pumping their children for information after visits, which was very hard on the children. It was difficult for adults to draw the line between interest in what the children had been doing and curiosity about the ex-partner's new life.

One child said the constant questioning had "torn her apart". Both parents were always asking about the other so she stopped seeing her father. Some children made secret visits. They would slip away after school to see mum or dad.

New relationships often resented

New relationships were common, often leading to remarriage, although in one on fifty cases the parents did patch up their differences and come together again. There tends to be less romantic love in remarriages and more emphasis on practical and financial advantages.

As with divorce, there was little discussion with the children. It was usually assumed that the children would just accept a new partner in their parent's bed. In practice their feelings ranged from warm love to strong resentment. One in four never accepted the new partner.

Teenagers were more likely to resent new relationships than younger children. In almost every case first names were used rather than "mum" or "dad". Only five out of 111 came to see the new person as a parent - in every case it was where divorce had happened at a very young age so there were few memories. Attitudes to a step-parent's own children were closely related to feelings about the step-parent, again ranging from affection to hostility.

In summary, the Edinburgh research shows us "parents can change partners, but children cannot change their parents although they can gain extra ones." Both the studies highlight the terrible price paid by the broken generation, coping as children with the sexual chaos of their parents.

More problems before and after divorce

Two big studies of groups of children born in 1946 and 1958 have also suggested that children do badly after divorce, even as adults. They were more likely to leave home early, marry in their teens, have children before the age of twenty three, they were more prone to emotional or psychological problems, particularly in their mid 30s and especially if they were women.

The effects were lifelong: by the time they were in their 40s these child survivors of divorce were more likely to have lost contact with their parents, even the one who brought them up. However social conditions were different then in terms of stigma and isolation. What about

more recent work?

In January 1994 the UK Family Policy Studies Centre tried to draw together all the research on lone parents and family disruption. The overall consensus is that children of divorce and single parenting do worse in almost every respect, for example in reading, writing, maths, anxiety levels and bad behaviour.

Divorce and separation is the worst environment, followed by single parenting which later becomes step-parenting and single parents who stay as single parents. The children of widows seem to suffer least.

One study found children born outside marriage were an average of ten months behind on reading age, after correcting for any bias caused by background, intelligence or other factors. These children did worse at reading and maths, got worse exam results than expected and got worse jobs later on.

A study in Cardiff in 1994 looked at young people who dropped out of education, training, apprenticeships and jobs. Many came from broken homes.

Across Britain in 1994 there were 76,000 young people who had left school yet slipped through the training and benefit "safety net", a new generation of "dead-end" teenagers. Some were at home with parents but no income, others were begging on the streets.

Every generation can be scandalised by its youth. Socrates wrote almost 2,400 years ago: "The young of today love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority and disrespect for their elders." However there do seem to be very worrying underlying trends today, clearly linked to destruction of family life by the sexual revolution.

We cannot possibly go further forward in the same direction when faced by the results. Adults may survive relationship burnout unscathed, but the evidence is clear that their children may not.

Time to think again about two income parenting about two income parenting

Given all of these things it is hardly surprising that we are seeing a change of heart by major opinion formers about the sexual revolution and what is good for children.

Take Penelope Leach for example, whose books on parenting influenced a generation. As Angela Lambert writes in the Independent:

"She was THE child care guru for the seventies; the companion of every mother's sleepless nights, of every helpless parent in despair as a toddler screamed himself blue, of every out-of-practice granny giving young parents a weekend off. Her book "Baby and Child" has sold more than two million copies worldwide in twenty seven ."

In her latest book "Children First" published in 1994 she is now promoting the view that children need parental attention and that the values of society have undermined parenting as a "worthless activity". In other words, society today often gives the impression that you are less of a person for staying at home with the children.

She is now telling the millions she influenced and a new generation which has followed, to reorder our priorities and devote more time, energy and money to children especially during their earliest years. She says young mothers should think about delaying a return to work and says bosses need to be far more understanding:

"I find it disgusting that women have to pretend to have a migraine in order to persuade an employer that they need to stay at home to nurse a child.....Rearing new people is at least as professional and creative as any high-status job. We know that what happens to children is terribly important, both to them and to society's future.... People must realise that phrases such as "children are our future" do have meaning - if you once get men to see it. We CAN afford the resources for people who wish to give two or three years to each child out of a 40-year professional life. The fundamental problem is that people just don't think children are important."

Mothers at home feel "odd"

A married mother at home with the youngest of four children said recently:

"I know I'm an oddity. People who choose to stay at home are ridiculed, aren't they? Mothering is regarded as a second class job. If I couldn't have looked after a baby myself I wouldn't have had one. But just because I'm at home it doesn't mean I don't know what's going on in the world..... at least my children know they're my first priority."

Mary Anne Sieghart wrote in the Times:

"For many the "love that dare not speak its name" is that of a working parent for a child.... Trapped in a working environment which prevented us from spending more time with our children: not just time we would LIKE to spend with them, but time we fear they NEED from us. You see, having children is not a hobby.. We compared our feelings of guilt...."

She describes a conversation with another political journalist, also a working parent, who remarked : "You know there are only two kinds of people in the world. Parents of young children and the rest." Two different worlds. Two different perspectives. Two different sets of pressures and priorities.

A change in job structure and social attitudes will come, she feels, but "the sadness for parents of my age, though, will be if the change comes too late for our children to reap the benefits. If theirs turns out to be the lost generation, will we ever forgive ourselves - or the attitudes that let us down?"

Day nurseries questioned as best

Penelope Leach points out that in older times mothers and children were at home but in extended caring groups of families and friends. Now virtually all productive work has been moved out of the home so mothers have a starker choice. Either they go out to work with feelings that they may be neglecting the children, or they stay at home with the prospect of loneliness and boredom.

Children in turn are separated from parents much more so that natural apprenticeship into adulthood is lost. "Instead of learning to do as adults do, they are learning to do as adults say."

In Australia, Penelope Leach's views have caused uproar, particularly for suggesting that day nurseries are quite inappropriate for children under the age of three, while in America the idea of a generation of babies reared in groups has been causing some unease for a decade.

She argues that babies and toddlers do far better when cared for by a parent, relative or childminder looking after her own and other children in an extended family. In Australia day care is the commonest pattern.

Penelope Leach points out how employers have made family life harder, having to be at work for 48 hours of 48 weeks of 48 years, instead of allowing for flexible working. Giving up full time work can be the end of promotion. We waste one to three hours a day commuting and have lunch with colleagues instead of with the family. New patterns of home working using the latest technology might help.

Claire Austin of the Institute of Management agrees: "It is not enough to have a workplace nursery. Companies must realise that women often have other responsibilities at home and this makes life difficult if there is a culture where meetings take place at 5.30pm and go on late".

Changes in British law giving full employment rights to part-time employees will help many wishing to combine parenting with earning. At the same time changes in the economy mean that most new jobs being created are part-time.

Countries vary greatly in allowances they make for children. In Sweden all parents are offered eighteen months leave around the birth of a child on 90% pay, paid out of employer's tax. After that they can opt to work a six hour day until the child is eight. Swedish parents at home with small children are considered normal and not penalised in careers. They do not lose out financially or socially since many other adults are doing the same.

Choices, standard of living and prices

These are big and emotive issues. Nothing is more prone perhaps to induce guilt in grown men or women than the suggestion that decisions we have made are damaging our children. However being a parent has big financial implications anyway, particularly in extra housing costs. Staying at home for one of a couple means being able to survive on one income, and many say this is impossible.

Some who say this to Sheila and I have simply made different choices. We have already seen the effects of the curse of comparison and the addiction of materialism. There is no rule on the earth that says that to be happy you have to have a car, or have two cars, or go abroad on holiday every year.

If you have the basic essentials it may be that many of the best things in life are free, and the most important cannot be bought: love, care, affection, health - sex even, especially in a stable relationship. Look at the lives of the richest people on earth. Their suicide rate is high, rate of depression is high.

For those in middle income brackets or above it can be true that however much you have, you never have enough, and however little you have, you tend to get by. I am obviously not talking about those for whom very survival depends on fragile circumstances.

"Parenting deficit" in America

There are other problems when both parents are earning full-time - similar to a single parent in a job. Who looks after sick children? What about half term? What about school holidays? What about life after school each day? Having friends round to play? Supervising homework? Hearing them read?

The Independent recently carried an editorial on parenthood in Britain and America:

"There has been a recent and marked reduction in the time parents have for their children. The Americans call it the "parenting deficit". ...The number of hours the average American parent spends with their children has nearly halved in the past twenty five years. The same pattern can be observed in Britain: harassed couples trying to juggle full-time jobs and family life. Single parents face even greater difficulties... Children suffer as a result...television and videos cannot replace guidance and support...There are hopeful signs....More fathers take their children to school but the domestication of the British male is painfully slow. For this feminism must take some of the blame. It has tended to denigrate domesticity, making it harder for men and women to gain self-esteem through parenting. Only now, after winning battles in the workplace, have women begun to assert the value of looking after children".

As we have seen, Penelope Leach may be facing an uphill battle. In the "me" generation the only thing that matters is my life, my feelings, my work, my pleasure, my future, my relationships and my sex life. Everything else is second level. The result is an atomised society. Every relational link becomes devalued because it involves sacrificing "me" for "we", laying aside some aspects of personal freedom to go on together. In an atomised world young children can almost cease to exist, and so can elderly parents.

However empty individualism is becoming discredited. Politicians of all parties are discovering that whatever their policies and the direction they would like to lead us in, it is hard to lead a bunch of individualists and build out of such a separatist group a cohesive, stable, caring, ordered society.

Big American rethink on children

Amitai Etzioni, Professor of Sociology at George Washington University and President of the American Sociological Association said recently in a pamphlet for the independent American think tank Demos that children had been sacrificed on the golden pedestal of careers and of "making it". Two generations of "celebrating greed" in two career households, with child care relegated to others, had produced a generation of "neglected children".

"Now we have seen the result of decades of neglect of children, the time has come for both parents to revalue children and for the community to support and recognise their efforts. Over the last twenty five years we have seen the future and it is not a wholesome one. With poor and ineffective community child care and with ever more harried parents it will not suffice to tell their graduates to "just say no" and expect them to resist all temptations, to forgo illegal drugs and alcohol and to postpone sexual activity."

Millions of mothers over the last twenty years had reduced their hours in the "parenting industry" by moving work outside the home while many fewer and often poorly paid people had taken on child care. Half the parenting labour force had been lost and replaced by fewer, less qualified people yet we still expected the same quality of product.

Of feminism Professor Etzioni said: "Few who advocated equal rights for women favoured a society in which sexual equality would mean that all adults would act like men, who in the past were relatively inattentive to children". He called for a wide range of government measures.

Single parents have had a hard time

So much then for the disastrous results of separation and divorce on children. What about single parenting? Surely one way to avoid the trauma of separation is not to bother with a long term relationship in the first place?

We have all read and reacted to comments by politicians that seem highly bigoted regarding single parent mothers. Many of us are fed up with insensitive verbal bashing of single people who are desperately struggling, as we have seen, coping with all the traumas not only of failed relationships, isolation and loneliness, but also of crippling poverty and the pressures of having to be provide as one parent what children normally find in two.

I have been very doubtful about some of the material quoted by some - especially on the political extreme right - since I had seen no concrete evidence to back their statements up.

However, as I have researched this book I have trawled through literally hundreds of recent research papers on family, children, marriage, divorce, cohabitation and outcomes. They make very sobering reading for all of us, wherever we find ourselves politically. Research cannot be a party political issue. Research simply creates an understanding on which policies can better be based.

In addition to wide reading, I have conducted a broader search using the latest computer technology to sift through summaries of over one and a half million research papers published in scientific journals between 1989 and 1994. Here are the patterns, and some of the most important headlines. I have also added some personal experience.

Single parenting is depressing and risky

We have already seen that raising children on your own as a single parent mother can be very depressing if you are on a low income and breakup of households creates poverty. Depression in single parent mothers also makes physical violence towards the children more likely, as well as verbal aggression. Moderate depression carries the highest risk of injury for children. This may be because the most severely depressed tend to be withdrawn and apathetic.

A national US survey of 6,000 households found single parents were more likely to use "abusive forms of violence" with their children than two-parent households. There was a link between poverty and child abuse in the case of single mothers but not with fathers.

The link between single parenting and child abuse is more easily understood from an American study of two parent families, which found a direct link between the closeness of the relationship between partners and how affectionate and caring they are with their three month old babies, Even when differences were allowed for in individual adjustment to the pregnancy and birth. Mothers in close/confiding relationships were more warm and sensitive to their children, while fathers were also more positive in attitude and role.

Children enjoy a share in their parents' love

The message is that parents who love each other tend to express that love to their children. There is an overflow of positive feelings from the partnership to the products of that partnership.

Where parents are in conflict, the children may suffer not just from the tension, but from a degree of emotional or physical deprivation compared to what they would have enjoyed if their parents were happy together. The protective shield around children is shattered by partner conflict.

As we have seen, the answer is not separation, which can make things far worse for children. The best solution is for children is reconciliation, working things through, communicating, learning to listen again - all things which may require professional support.

Perhaps the breakdown of family life is part of the explanation for the doubling of rates of murder for babies less than a year old that took place in America between 1985 and 1990, or the quadrupled national homicide rate for children between one and four years old during the same period.

School performance affected by parenting

Returning to single parents, there is direct evidence that their children do worse at school, on average - the difference is seen at almost every age and increases with time. These studies have taken great care not to confuse differences in background or intelligence, bearing in mind that as we have seen, better educated people divorce less and more often get married before having children.

Ask any teacher which children are likely to be in greatest difficulties at school. Most will tell you they can often tell which children are under great stress at home.

Sick at home alone

Sickness is another nightmare for single parents. All children get ill and with every child the risk grows that one or more may be ill on any given day. What happens to the others? Two need to be walked to school. The other is vomiting every half hour and much too sick to walk a mile there and back, too young to be left. In an atomised, fractured society, where few neighbours or friends are at home during the day, what do you do? Where do you get help?

And what happens when you are ill yourself? Who steps in then? Some say "I just can't afford to be ill". As a doctor I know such a life has no margin, no reserve, no contingency and people do get ill, very ill, for long periods - and can take a long time to die too. We deny such nasty thoughts and carry on living.

That is hardly a satisfactory model of child rearing. It may work most of the time, but we are gambling with our own bodies, and our children pay the price when health breaks down.

I am not talking about flu, coughs, colds or a migraine. There is more to medicine than that: broken legs, gall stone operations, appendicitis or worse. And a child in hospital is no joke either, even where there are two parents both able to take time off work. If several children are at home the result can be total disruption, especially if the child in hospital is very young, needing constant comfort and reassurance when feeling very unwell and distressed.

So what does a single parent do? Move the whole of family life into the ward? The risk doubles with two children, triples with three and so on. So much of the media image of single parent families is naive, distorted and impossibly simple. The image is of a single mother pushing a buggy. But having one child

journals they write, the accounts of their weekends, the comments they make in class, their emotional vulnerability, their behaviour and concentration.

Some disturbed behaviour is due to mental difficulties, but in many others it is linked what is happening at home. When the home situation settles, behaviour settles. When home flares up, behaviour worsens.

How do you teach a six year old to read when she is eating rubbers and making herself sick, urinating on the floor and stealing all biscuits from other children's lunch boxes or running out of the classroom? Most child psychologists would agree that such a child is looking for attention - a search for recognition, value, care and affection.

It is easy to get angry with such "unreasonable" behaviour until you discover that the problems suddenly got worse the day the father walked out a few weeks ago, leaving the family destitute. Now mother and children are homeless, sharing one room in a bed and breakfast "hotel" where everyone is chucked out on the streets at eight thirty in the morning and not allowed back till evening.

Only a child once

Volume after volume on child and adult psychology points to the enormous importance of early childhood experience. You can only be a child once. For a child shunted between different homes, schools, parents and grandparents those years have gone. Finished, destroyed, vaporised. They can never be recovered and all the years to come can never rewrite their history. This is especially true when it comes to learning. Ground lost is often never made up. Time and time again Sheila and I have seen it with people we know. They are stuck in jobs they find tedious and boring because family trauma wrecked their schooling and destroyed their futures.

The normal process of growing up and leaving home in a planned way seems to be more difficult if you have been brought up in a "non-traditional family".

A survey of over 4,000 Scottish teenagers found that family breakdown was a significant factor in the timing of many leaving home. For example, 44% of those with a step-parent at the age of sixteen had left home three years later, compared with only 33% with a single parent and 27% with both parents at home.

One in four of those who left home before the age of eighteen because of domestic tension were soon homeless. Six out of ten of all homeless young people gave family problems as the reason for their situation.

The Children's Society in the UK reckons one in seven of all children have run away from home at least once by the time they are sixteen. The police deal with 100,000 cases a year but a survey of 1,000 children suggests that only the minority are reported.

Every time a child leaves home it is likely that education stops from that day on until - if ever - he or she returns. You cannot just turn up at a new school two days after you arrive in a strange city.

Thousands of teenagers land up sleeping rough on the streets of London. This disturbing trend has been blamed by some politicians on parents, while specialist care agencies blame government for depriving many teenagers of the benefits they need to survive. These young people are just some of 400,000 registered homeless in Britain - a dramatic increase from only 170,000 in 1983. The real numbers may be larger.

Many homeless young people have been sexually abused, but may then be at further risk of abuse on the street, or of being recruited by pimps. Terrible situations at home can contribute to a downward spiral of high mobility, fragmented relationships, sexually transmitted disease, unwanted pregnancy and problems bringing up their own children. It is a very different thing from a mother or father coping on their own with three or four, particularly with the added complications of different fathers.

Social support helps single parents

Support by friends can make all the difference, not just covering for sickness, but sharing the load in other ways. Research shows that where there are behaviour problems at home, extra social support for the single parent can help settle a child, particularly when combined with formal child management training for the parent. Incidentally, being an only child in a single parent situation may be particularly likely to result in emotional disturbance.

So much for the great freedom of the sexual revolution. What started out as liberty has become a prison, a chain, a bind, a curse, a terrible burden carried by children while their parents are often too busy sorting out their own problems to notice the full extent of the damage, most of which is beneath the surface.

Single parents have less time for attention

There is another problem all single parents face: attention stretch. Recently I looked after our four children aged four to eleven while Sheila was at a weekend conference. I was at full stretch - attention stretch.

Elizabeth wanted to show me her homework. Paul wanted help with his violin. John wanted to be taken to a friend's, Caroline and Elizabeth needed to be taken somewhere else.

Elizabeth and Caroline are arguing over whose turn it is to play with a favourite new toy. Paul has fallen over and needs a cuddle. John wants help to find a computer game.

We go to the park. Paul yells at me to come over and watch his acrobatics on the climbing frame. Caroline wants me to look at how high she can swing. John wants me to explain why United Nations can't do more in Bosnia and Elizabeth is tugging at my arm trying to tell me something...

Each of them wanted time from me, not from each other or from another adult. Attention is the feeling you get that you are important to your mum or dad. All of us can remember proudly building a lego model or a sand castle on the beach, then crushing disappointment when Mum or Dad did not seem to care, made a passing comment, or were too busy or lazy to congratulate us on our masterpieces. Such things to some extent are an inevitable part of normal childhood, but at such times it feels as though no other affirmation will do.

An emotional crisis is common later on in life if a person realises they never had any real encouragement from mum or dad. Perhaps they were too busy, perhaps they didn't care, perhaps they were getting divorced, perhaps they were divorced so there was only one of them.

We have lost count of the number of times people have shared their sadness with us over these things. With separation the need for affirmation by both parents grows - it does not get less.

Pseudo-parents and step-parents

Then we come to the thorny issue of pseudo-parents or step-parents. Blood ties are as powerful as the great dramas of fiction suggest. Children have a massive pull to their own genetic parents, as almost all parents have to their own children, although it takes some time after birth to fully develop.

The effect is profound and psychological based on knowledge and identity. We all try to make sense of who we are, and of our past. That is why adopted children so often search for their genetic parents.

A friend of ours discovered at the age of almost fifty that her "parents" were not her parents after all. For all that time she had no idea whatever. Yet in the moment of that discovery she was launched into a crisis, a search for her real identity. Who was her mother? Was her father still alive? She was unable to rest for months until she eventually found her mother and finally her father too, which involved a trip to another country.

This pull of biology is why step parents are usually onto a loser before they start if they try to fill a parental role. As we have seen, they usually do better to try to be an adult friend, an "uncle" or "aunt" rather than a mother or father.

Step parents are often puzzled, upset and confused by this rejection. But it is almost universal.

This is different from adoption of an older child who for various reasons has chosen deliberately to adopt new parents in just as much of a commitment as the new parents have in adopting a child.

So parents are important.

The most shocking and disturbing thing of all to me is that I even needed to write the previous sentence, because we all know deep down it is true but often live as though we don't believe it.

More than one way to raise children

Are there any alternatives to the nuclear family that work? For much of human history the commonest pattern has been extended family, with three generations living together. Such households provide a stable base for growing children, with grandparents helping parents who are often labouring in fields or involved in other income generation.

In Britain such three generational living is more common in those from ethnic minority backgrounds, whether Asian, Afro-Caribbean or other groups.

In many white families such generational ties are collapsing. Indeed we can see a very important new trend. When we look closely we find some of the price of the sex revolution: divorce, break-up, extra child care, has often been paid by grandparents who have lived by different values. While their children took risks and make a mess of things, they soldiered on through many difficulties and are still together today.

But what will happen in the next twenty years? The social insurance policy of an older generation with more stable relationships will not be there if present trends continue.

Already we are seeing therapists in danger of assuming parental roles for single parent families. With no partner to help and many social pressures the counsellor may be the only supportive person left with whom parent and child can work through their conflicts, in a way that might not have been necessary if both parents were still supporting each other.

The broken generation grows up

The British National Child Development Study (NCD) is an ongoing study of 17,000 children born in the week of 3-9 March 1958. It has contributed much to our understanding of adult relationships and the impact on children.

As in other studies those divorced were more likely to suffer further "relationship breakdown". Once again higher education and home ownership was associated with lower divorce rates - probably an effect of culture in different social groups. The differences in education are very striking for lone mothers. British government figures for 1988 and 1989 show that only 2% had a degree or equivalent, and 45% had no qualifications at all. In other households with dependent children, 13% had a degree or equivalent and only 18% had no qualifications. Huge differences.

All this is mounting evidence for a relatively affluent, well educated, basically traditional but influential group who are totally different in outlook and lifestyle from a growing underclass of the deprived and under-privileged, many of which live at or below the poverty line in run down inner urban areas.

People who go to University have far fewer partners as teenagers, more of them look forward to getting married before having children, and when they do so, they are far more likely to stay together.

These findings may be linked together with other facts to emerge from the NCD study. For example, the risk of low birth weight, ill health in babies and death from sickness or accidents may be related in part to social class as much as circumstances of parenting.

Where are the fathers?

A recent review of all research on single parents published by the Institute of Economic Affairs concluded:

"We have not yet come across, or succeeded in being directed to, any serious statistical study that shows on the average babies who have lacked a sociological father fare better than babies who have had a sociological father. But nearly all the serious statistical studies we have examined show that.... they do worse, The longer the same father has been part of the child's life, and the more effectively the father has taken part in the life of the family, the better the results for the child".

Oxford social scientist Professor Halsey, distinguished socialist and researcher commented:

"What should be universally acknowledged is that children of parents who do not follow the traditional norm (ie taking active and personal responsibility for the social upbringing of the

children they generate) are thereby disadvantaged in many major aspects of their chances of living a successful life. On the evidence available such children tend to die earlier, to have more illness, to do less well at school, to exist at a lower level of nutrition, to suffer more unemployment, to be more prone to deviance and crime and finally to repeat the cycle of unstable parenting from which they themselves have suffered".

In 1979-1980, Professor Kolvin at the Nuffield Psychology and Psychiatry Department of Newcastle University led a study of a random sample of 264 men and women aged 32-33, looking at their experience of fatherhood by the age of fifteen. The group had already been studied at various stages of development since birth.

He looked at deprivation, measured by parental illness, poor physical and emotional care of the child (personal and domestic dirtiness, poor clothing), debt, unemployment, overcrowding and general incompetence in the mother and finally marital instability.

Where fathers had been absent for all the child's life the child was more than three times as likely to be suffering from multiple deprivation. This was after taking great care to eliminate other factors. The children's weights were lighter in father-absent families. One in three in multi-deprived families had speech defects at five years of age, and were four times as likely to have been burned or scalded in accidents.

The multi-deprived children were four times as likely to have criminal records as young adults; 15% had been convicted at least eleven times compared to only 2% of the non-deprived group.

Professor Kolvin found that the presence of a natural father in the home was one of four powerful protectors against delinquency in teenage girls.

Divorce breeds divorce

And what happens to the children's children? What happens to a generation who have lost the memory and experience of happy lifelong partnerships? They are more likely to divorce

themselves. In other words, your own divorce may well help wreck your children's marriages too.

Divorce today breeds divorce tomorrow. Divorce tomorrow risks more divorce in the future. Relationship destruction spreads like an infection, like a gangrene, for generations to come.

I was an undergraduate at Cambridge with a female medical student. We did a lot together. She told me she would never get married "because of how it has hurt my parents".

She was so cynical, that the question of divorce never even arose. She was utterly convinced that lifelong commitments were emotionally suicidal.

My wife and I have spent many hours helping couples in trouble. We always find it harder if one or both have never ever experienced stable adult relationships that worked.

Anyone can commit adultery

Anyone can commit adultery. It only takes ten minutes in someone's living room or in the back of a car. What on earth is so clever about that? But who can work out a relationship for over half a century and still be smiling together at the end? Adultery is particularly traumatic to children and to spouses, because adultery almost always involves deception and betrayal. Not exactly virtues in any society or by any world view.

Adultery is not just a single act of deception either. It is usually gross deception over a period of time within the most intimate of relationships, the betrayal of a companion, lover and friend.

Adultery is infectious for another reason: it takes two to do it. Break-up can lead to break-up, as more separated people fan out through the community looking for new partners. Some of those new partners may already be married - and so the havoc spreads.

Community living

An alternative to extended families for children is the commune idea of the 1960's. However a much larger and longer lasting radical social experiment has been observed for several decades.

The Kibbutz philosophy makes a fascinating study. Here are a large number of people who have committed themselves over long periods to give up individual rights and responsibilities, in order to gain individual freedom and corporate duties.

Property is held in common, men and women do the same jobs for the same pay, and - most importantly - child rearing becomes a dormitory-based communal activity. So what happens?

The first thing to emerge is that while the ideals may have been well defined across the movement, practice has since altered. Parents are now seeking greater autonomy and sleeping arrangements for children are becoming family based again.

One problem with any kind of shared parenting is leadership. Who decides what the house rules are? Bed times? Standards of table manners? What television programmes are acceptable? Attitude to parents and other adults?

Sheila and I live in an extended household with three others sharing our home as well as our four children. However demarcation lines are clear, and only the two of us discipline them - unless neither of us are not around. At one stage a few years ago we considered buying a very large property with a number of other families but possible conflicts with other parents and their standards or values regarding children put us off.

So then, community living is no answer to the traumatic experiences of children trying to cope with their parent's sexual adventures and relationship problems. There has to be a better way

and we had better find it - quickly. It is of course mutual faithfulness in a relationship that works.

I want to look now at the link between the sexual revolution and crime, sex abuse and other criminal activity, especially by the young.

* Rising Price of Love - book by Patrick Dixon - published 1995