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DADDIES MATTER: A LONG OVERDUE CHAT ON THE FAMILY



Every family has to sit down from time to time and discuss sensitive subjects. My family does it. I'm sure yours does, too. It's like most things in life: The longer you avoid dealing with something, the more painful it is when the day of reckoning arrives.

The sensitive subject many of us in the Democratic family have avoided for too long is—you guessed it—the family. As some Republicans are very quick and correct to point out, the single biggest social problem we have in America is the breakdown of families. This is not an original conclusion on their part, of course. The person to whom we owe the greatest debt of thanks in this area is Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the scholarly liberal from New York who first sounded the alarm back in the mid-1960s. But fairness requires that I hand out some credit to Republicans, too—people like Bill Bennett and even Dan Quayle. Like Moynihan, they took all kinds of criticism, too much of it from good Democrats.

By now the weight of evidence in their favor is overwhelming. Without a hint of the usual academic hemming and hawing, the research shows conclusively that there is no substitute for stable, two-parent families. And believe me, when I talk about the research, I'm not referring to a bunch of right-wing pseudoscience.

I'm referring to rock-solid research done by experts of all political persuasions—and, yes, that includes a large helping of liberal Democrats.

I suppose we can choose to ignore this consensus and pretend that having so many kids growing up without their daddies has no social consequences. But let's get real. At this point, taking that approach would be no better than pretending that smoking doesn't cause cancer. Sure, plenty of kids from single-parent families turn out just fine. And some smokers run marathons and live to be ninety years old. But does that mean that growing up without a daddy or smoking a pack a day isn't harmful to most people? Of course not. The cause and effect relationships here are simply beyond dispute.

And please don't look at this as an issue that's confined to lower-income people caught in a "cycle of dependency." We need to face up to the fact that it just isn't an "us" versus "them" issue. It is an issue that touches every corner of society. We need to find ways to strengthen *all* our families. Studies by superstar researchers like Princeton's Sara McLanahan show that middle- and upper-class kids whose parents are divorced can be hurt just as bad as inner-city kids who never even knew their daddies. And if you want anecdotal evidence, go ask anyone who teaches kids, from nursery school on up. They'll tell you that it doesn't take too long to see whether any given kid from any given neighborhood or background comes from a one- or two-parent home. It's pretty obvious.

Our party shouldn't just be talking about this subject. We should be out there on some mountain screaming about it! We simply cannot prosper as a nation when we've got so many problems in our homes.

Why have we avoided talking about single parents and the importance of daddies? Well, we're a party that doesn't like preaching

to people—you know, live and let live. But by letting the Republicans do most of the talking, we have let them own the issue. We have let them use “family values” as a way of bashing gays, working women, non-Christians, and the poor. We have let them use it as a way of tearing us apart instead of bringing our families closer together. And the whole Democratic Party has paid a steep price. We have all been caught on the receiving end of an uninterrupted barrage of silly-ass “family values” attacks.

If you think “silly-ass” is too strong, let me remind you what some of these attacks have looked like. Pat Robertson says this country’s “ruinous moral decay and social breakdown” was caused by “a thirty-year war that the radical Left has waged against the traditional family.”¹ Newt Gingrich runs around telling people that America’s social decay is the result of “a long pattern of counter-culture belief . . . deep in the Democratic Party” that has “undervalued the family.”²

It gets worse. Gingrich suggested to the nation that Susan Smith drowned her kids in a South Carolina lake because Democrats were in control of Congress. (That, of course, was before he realized that Susan Smith’s stepfather, a local Republican official and a member of the advisory board of the Christian Coalition, molested her on the same night the guy was nailing up Pat Robertson for President posters.)

The biggest victims of this onslaught have been the President and the First Lady. Holding up the banner of family values, the right-wingers have launched never-ending personal attacks on the President and his family. They have called the President and First Lady “counterculture McGoverniks.”³ And, of course, they have tried to turn out the bigot vote by calling the First Lady a “radical feminist”⁴ who likens “marriage to slavery.”⁵

The point is not only that the attacks on the party and the First Family have been utterly false, malicious, undignified, and downright unpatriotic. It is that they have been completely, inexcusably hypocritical.

I've had it. I cannot turn the other cheek. I've gotten both of them slapped so many times I ain't got nothing left to turn. It's time for a new approach. It's time for us to start giving the American people a peek inside the Republicans' glass house.

You see, the guiding spirits of the Republican Party—folks who are mighty quick to accuse the Democratic Party of destroying the American family and to preach about the value of tossing single mothers out into the streets—have not exactly been models of family virtue. Among many other things, far too many of them have left young kids behind after divorcing their wives.

The number-one family-values hypocrite who ever lived on the planet earth is Newt Gingrich. From now on, every time I hear him single out single mothers without saying a word about cut-and-run daddies, I will remind everyone that Gingrich left his first wife and his two teenage children. Every time he says that “any male who does not take care of his children is a bum,”⁶ as he did in his most recent book, I will remind everyone that his first wife had to take him to court because he refused to provide adequate child support and that his church had to take up a collection to help his kids. Every time I hear him spout off about the President's marriage, I will remind everyone that the Speaker of the House of Representatives tried to get a divorce settlement out of his wife while she was lying in the hospital with cancer.

Let's do a study in contrasts. When the President and his wife had a difficult time in their marriage, they made a courageous decision: they decided to work through it. They talked openly about their problems and decided to keep the family together. As a result, Bill Clinton did not abandon his daughter. Chelsea Clinton comes home in the afternoon and gets help on her schoolwork from her daddy. When she goes out on Saturday nights, her daddy waits up for her. Chelsea Clinton is growing up in a loving, nurturing, two-parent family.

Newt Gingrich and a number of the Republican Party's other leaders talked the talk, all right. But when it came time for them to

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE CAKE

One Sunday I was kicking back with *The Times* of London, and I happened upon an op-ed piece that made the remaining hair on my head stand straight up. It was by the infamous Charles Murray, coauthor of *The Bell Curve* and now a driving intellectual force in the Republican Party.

What was so outrageous? Well, sometimes you hear right-wingers criticizing women on welfare without mentioning the role of fathers in the whole equation. In this article, Murray was much more direct. He said that the father "has approximately the same causal responsibility [for getting a woman pregnant] as a slice of chocolate cake has in determining whether a woman gains weight."*

This from a guy who divorced his wife when they had young kids at home. At least now I understand why the original Republican welfare proposals were tough on kids and easy on deadbeat dads.

* Charles Murray, "Keep It in the Family," *Sunday Times* (London), Nov. 14, 1993.

walk the walk, they walked right the hell out of their children's lives. Am I the only one who believes that a better example for the nation is a couple that has trouble and decides to stick together and raise their child together?

Before I end this chapter, I want you to know that I firmly believe that Democrats can take up the cause of the family and do it in a very positive way. I know that seems strange right now, when all we've heard so far is a message of hate from the right-wingers and when I've been pushing us to go into attack mode ourselves. But it is possible to bring up the topic of the family and make this a discussion that includes the rich, the poor, Christians,

Jews, Muslims, blacks, whites, reds, yellows, and anyone else who wants to participate.

Even if the right-wingers are still out there polarizing people with their attacks, and even if we have to spend some of our time exposing their hypocrisy in an aggressive way, we can lend a voice of sanity to this issue. We can calmly explain why all the talk of personal responsibility doesn't go very far if we are intent on kicking away the very props that families desperately need in order to make ends meet. I'm talking about funding for education. I'm talking about help with health care and child care. I'm talking about tax credits for working families struggling near the poverty line. I'm talking about a minimum wage that would allow a daddy or a mommy to support a child.

Labor Secretary Reich summed it up better than anyone:

We honor family values every time we create a job. We honor family values every time children have a safe place to go when their parents are at work. We honor family values every time we secure a working person's pension. We honor family values every time we teach a child to learn. We honor family values every time we move a young mother from welfare to work, or help a worker get better skills, or help someone who has lost a job to find a new one.⁸

Family values is about lending a helping hand, not a swinging foot, to those who are down. It is about paychecks. It is about security. It is about hope.

And, yes, it does involve preaching about morals. But we've had more than enough religion of division. Let's tone down the fire and brimstone and pump up the compassion and support. Again, there is a positive way to do this. We should have figured that out long ago.