

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY)

June 18, 2006 Sunday

Editorial: Families' Real Enemies: Violence and Poverty

By The Lexington Herald-Leader, KY

June 18 – Pick the better answer:

1. Families are threatened when:
 - a. Gay people marry.
 - b. Fathers beat mothers.
2. A mother will be better able to raise healthy children if:
 - a. She remains in an abusive relationship.
 - b. She receives training and finds a good-paying job.
3. Poverty and violence are:
 - a. Good for families.
 - b. Bad for families.
4. Abusers were:
 - a. Often abused as children.
 - b. Rarely abused as children.

Stupid quiz, right?

So stupid that even in an era of overblown and deeply cynical rhetoric about values, it's hard to believe the U.S. Senate spent days debating a constitutional amendment to define marriage while millions of families struggle with the intertwined threats of violence and poverty.

So stupid that a family-promoting president has cut funds for research that could point to ways to stop the cycle of domestic violence that hurts fetuses, young children, their mothers and future families. So stupid that money to help families emerge from poverty is being diverted into "marriage promotion" programs of no proven value that can encourage women to stay with their children in abusive marriages.

Stupid but true.

President Bush's 2007 budget proposes deep cuts in programs to assist women who are victims of violence and sexual abuse. He has also waged a budgetary war on scientific research that has made it hard for researchers in the field to continue their work.

The president has, though, carved \$1.4 billion out of welfare funding for a variety of what are called marriage promotion programs. They are supposed to create healthier families and lessen poverty. Proponents cite studies that show poverty is more prevalent in one-parent homes. From that, they make the leap that more marriages will mean fewer poor people.

This cause-and-effect assumption has echoes of the logic that gave birth to prohibition. If drinking is bad and you outlaw alcohol, the problem will be solved. As we learned from that great experiment, you don't get good public policy based on simplistic and flawed assumptions.

We know that poverty and violence are two of the greatest risk factors for families and children. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely than their peers to be violent, to have health problems and to commit sex crimes. Men who witnessed domestic violence as children are twice as likely to become abusers as those who didn't.

Poverty is bad for families. Stress is a constant as they struggle for adequate housing, food, transportation and medical care. Poverty is also a risk factor for domestic violence.

As many as 60 percent of women receiving welfare have been victims of domestic violence, compared to 22 percent in the general population. Child abuse is also a common companion to domestic abuse. It is not right to encourage women to stay in marriages that are dangerous for themselves and their children.

Children have the right to grow up in healthy, stable homes, and society is better when they do.

That's why it's important that what we do to help families is based not on what some people feel is right or might work, but on what we know works. That's why it's also critical to continue asking – through research – what does and doesn't work.

It's a cheap political trick to pander for votes by railing about the dangers of gay marriages and single-parent households when poverty and violence are the real enemies that threaten families.

Copyright © 2006 Lexington Herald-Leader.

Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News. For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.