

Healthy Marriage



Ask a child whether she wants to live with both parents or just one, and she will choose both most every time. Children are born yearning for a

mother and father who love them and who love each other, and they suffer if that need isn't met.

That's not just a lofty ideal; it's the overwhelming finding of marriage research. "Why Marriage Matters," a report issued by a dozen nationally recognized experts in the field of marriage research, summarizes many of the ways marriage benefits children: Marriage increases the likelihood that children will stay out of poverty, do well in school, get a job, be healthy, have good relationships with their fathers, and wait to become parents. Children living with their married biological parents also are less likely to be abused, commit suicide, spend time in jail, and abuse drugs and alcohol.

Unfortunately, a growing number of Americans don't view marriage and parenting as a package deal. Births to unmarried parents nationally have skyrocketed from less than 6 percent of total births in 1960 to more than one-third today.

This isn't heartening for anyone concerned about the best interests of children. At the Office of Attorney General, we see the impact of out-of-wedlock

births every day. More than half of the one million children we serve through our Child Support Division were born to unmarried parents. Establishing paternity and collecting child support are just a couple of the many ways we help give these young ones a future filled with hope. But is this enough?

One boy I met recently is a star student, despite being abandoned by his father. The boy and his mom were thrilled we were tracking down the thousands of dollars in child support his dad had refused to pay. Yet, there was an emptiness in his life that all the money in the world couldn't fill -- a vacuum left by a father who was no longer around.

As a compassionate state, Texas does everything it can to help these children, through child support and the array of other social services we provide. But when will we begin to focus more on a path of prevention, and not just a bridge to recovery?

The fact is, healthy, married families are the best child support there is. A child is loved there, supported there, protected there. We can encourage more healthy marriages by helping unmarried parents interested in building a healthy marriage acquire the skills and information they need to make informed decisions and to manage the challenges that arise in marriage. We also can arm them with information about relationship-building skills and cooperative parenting.

Do any unmarried parents want help building a healthy marriage? Yes, according to a major Princeton University study.

When asked at the time of their child's birth, 53 percent of unmarried mothers and 63 percent of unmarried fathers reported being interested in a healthy marriage program.

For a healthy marriage initiative to work, it cannot be done through coercion or guilt, but only by appealing to couples already inclined toward marriage. We also must take seriously the issue of domestic violence, making safety our number one priority. And we will continue to support single parents, who face significant challenges in raising their children.

Of course, the path of prevention is never a quick fix. It took decades for us to get here, and turning things around for Texas families and children won't happen tomorrow. But we must start the journey.

Collaborations involving the public and the private, the religious and the secular, the liberal and the conservative are crucial to supporting healthy marriage. My office is sponsoring a series of six regional summits across Texas to bring these varied stakeholders together. Partnering with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and the Texas Workforce Commission, we are convening community leaders to discuss how we can support healthy families and healthy marriages.

We owe it to our children to do this, because if we don't, it is they who will suffer the consequences.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Valuing Texas Families

The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) is committed to valuing Texas families and children.

As a compassionate state, Texas does everything it can to help children in need.

Last year, the OAG collected a record \$1.67 billion in child support that helps pay for food, clothing, shelter and other necessities for children.

To truly work for the best interests of children, Texas should also encourage healthy marriage.

Children living with their married parents are more likely to

- Live above the poverty line;
- Do well in school;
- Get a job;
- Be healthy;
- Have good relationships with their fathers; and
- Wait to become parents.

They are less likely to:

- Be abused;
- Commit suicide;
- Spend time in jail; and
- Abuse drugs and alcohol.

As a first step, the OAG has sponsored summits to discuss healthy marriage with leaders in six communities around Texas.



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Information on this and other topics is available on the Attorney General's Web site at www.oag.state.tx.us.