



Family that stays together achieves better

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One of the top priorities of ministries of education across this great land is student achievement.

Test scores show which provinces excel. For instance, Alberta is top of the pack for reading, followed by Ontario, B.C. and Quebec. Curriculum, class size, standardized testing, funding: All are levers governments use to improve results.

Certainly, some of these measures are helpful. But what if there is actually something very foundational that improves results and it's something the government can do very little about?

A new, international report makes the claim that Canadian children score higher on literacy tests and are less likely to repeat a grade if — wait for it — raised by two parents.

According to the World Family Map Project, released last week, "children living with two parents had higher reading literacy scores and were less likely to repeat a grade compared to those living with either one parent or neither parent in all three North American countries included in the report."

The researchers go on: "This pattern is found even after accounting for the higher levels of poverty and lower levels of parental education among single-parent families."

Now this is awkward. Governments can pour money into education, but if children are not coming from stable homes, it's like throwing money into the cold, Canadian wind. There is no quick government fix for family breakdown. But neither should politicians go to great lengths to avoid this research.

This is, all too often, the common response, alongside getting offended. No one knows better than single parents that raising children solo is difficult. But still, many fear alienating these families and as a result, they speak of this research rarely, if at all.

Research is just research; it can reveal a trend line or show inconsistencies, or — the favourite of many an academic and think-tank — result in the need for further research.

It is our practical response that matters most.

For one, if we acknowledge that family breakdown has negative effects on children, our lackadaisical attitude toward marital dissolution is not a loving one.

A more compassionate response hearing of a pending divorce in low-conflict marriages might involve encouragement to stay together. (Families are not the place to say “live and let live,” as documented in the 2001 book *Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn't Work.*)

There are some small things government can do to limit family breakdown. This includes eliminating the marriage penalty in the tax code, which Canada finally did in 2007. It could include tax benefits for married parents — still the most stable family form.

Politicians all claim to want to improve the education system for kids. They might like to step back and consider the bigger picture. Fixing our schools is a Sisyphean task when families don't flourish.

Fortunately, in Canada, 78% of children still live with two parents. (This doesn't account for whether these are biological or step-parents, which also makes a difference in outcomes.)

Politicians can only control so much. Increasing funding, decreasing classroom size or starting kids in school earlier won't make the changes we'd like to see until Canadians are allowed to hear this research. It's actually a positive message, saying that families really matter.

When we hear this research, we can try to apply it individually, regardless of whether politically correct politicians are paying attention.

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