The Washington Post

January 15, 1995

Broken Family Values

(Book Review)

By Douglas J. Besharov

Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps
By Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur
Harvard. 196 pp. $19.95

Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance
By David Elkind
Harvard. 260 pp. $19.95

No one doubts that the American family is under assault. About 40 percent of marriages end in divorce, about a third of all babies are born out of wedlock. As a result, say the experts, about half of all American children will spend at least some time in a single-parent home before they are 18.

America's children pay a steep price for family breakdown, as Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur document in *Growing Up with a Single Parent*. Based on careful analysis of data from various national surveys, the two professors of sociology show that "children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents."

Because income and family structure are so powerfully linked, up to now some people have been able to argue that poverty, not family breakdown, is responsible for the declining condition of children. Witness the *Murphy Brown* debate. As the first systematic attempt to disentangle the effects of poverty from family breakdown across a range of problems afflicting children, this book should help still such arguments.

By using sophisticated statistical techniques to control for such background characteristics as income and race, McLanahan and Sandefur show that, although growing up poor is very damaging to children, single parenthood is in itself severely injurious. "Compared with teenagers of similar background who grow up with both parents at home," they find that "adolescents who have lived apart from one of their parents during some period of childhood are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before age twenty, and one and a half times as likely to be 'idle'—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early twenties."

These are only averages, however. As the authors are careful to point out, many children are doing just fine in single-parent homes. It's just that many others are not.

Because McLanahan and Sandefur are bona fide liberals, their findings cannot be dismissed as right-wing nostalgia for the "traditional" family and, thus, are likely to be a major force in the ongoing debate about family values. Nevertheless, it is difficult to recommend their book to the casual reader. While the very richness of its analysis makes the book a powerful tool for social policy, its technical detail will make it relatively inaccessible to someone not well-versed in the academic literature.

In *Ties That Stress*, David Elkind, a professor of child study at Tufts University, is equally negative about the quality of contemporary child rearing. He argues that, nowadays, even children in two-parent families are getting the short end of the stick. In style and content, though, this book is addressed to the general reader much like another of Elkind's books, *The Hurried Child*, which described how children today are not "given the time to enjoy the pleasures, as well as the pains and frustrations, unique to childhood."

At all levels of our society, Elkind says, many parents now place their "need for self-realization and self-fulfillment before the needs of the family as a unit." They invest less of themselves in their children—even though they may spend more money on them. Compared to 1960, for example, parents spend 10 to 12 fewer hours a week with their children.

Divorce and out-of-wedlock births are, to Elkind, simply at one end of a continuum of contemporary parental lifestyle choices that serve the needs of parents rather than those of children. It was, after all, not so many years ago, that many parents in unhappy marriages stayed together "for the sake of the children" and many young couples felt obliged to marry if the woman became pregnant. The Census Bureau calls the latter "post-conception marriages"; the rest of us call them "shotgun weddings."

Don't think, however, that Elkind is one of those out-of-touch males who yearns for the good old days when more women were content to stay at home baking cookies. As he tellingly describes, the prototypical Ozzie-and-Harriet marriage of the 1950s was a relatively new development and, more important, was inherently unstable—because of its "focus on the successful rearing of children at the expense of parental (particularly maternal) opportunities for personal and vocational growth."

The result? Married women, he says, "often felt exploited" and were consistently reported as more depressed than married men. He reminds us of the endemic use of tranquilizers, especially Valium, by middle-class mothers during the 1950s.

So Elkind, like most Americans, does not want to return to the "good old days." But that does not prevent him from lamenting that the escape from this past "exploitation" of mothers has been purchased at the expense of children. For example, he blames the decline of parental self-sacrifice for the lower SAT scores and growing psychological problems of today's youth.

In different ways, each of these books seeks to answer the same question: What should we do as

traditional family structures seem to be crumbling? McLanahan and Sandefur seem to think that the process is irreversible and that the government, through increased economic support for low-income families, must step in to minimize the harm to children. Many people, of course, worry about the added dependency that more generous welfare programs would cause. Moreover, the recent congressional elections suggest that, for the foreseeable future, the possibility of more generous welfare programs is remote.

Elkind, on the other hand, thinks the solution lies with a change in parental behavior. He sees contemporary families "stumbling" toward a new balance between the needs of children and the needs of parents, one that integrates the mutual responsibility of the traditional family with the freedoms of the contemporary family. There are small signs that just such a correction may have started: The divorce rate, although much too high, has actually fallen a bit during the last decade; for two years, at least, we have seen a small decline in teen parenthood; and the amount of time that fathers spend caring for their children is up.

Let's hope that Elkind is right—because government programs like the ones proposed by McLanahan and Sandefur will never be an adequate substitute for good parents.