

Dan Quayle was right

Credit for the catchy title goes to Barbara Whitehead from her article about the effects of single parenting on children. The article received national attention twice — once when it appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in April 1993, and then again, a few months ago, when President Clinton joined the family values bandwagon.

Whitehead's premise is simple, alarming and well supported. Children of single parents have a handicap that affects their ability to compete and function compared with children from two-parent families. Psychologists continue to debate whether or not the emotional effects of divorce have a lasting effect on children or whether or not healthy development requires two opposite-gender parents, but the cold hard facts are that two parents are better than one. Children living with single parents because of divorce or illegitimacy rarely enjoy the advantages of those in intact families. Children of single parents are six times as likely to be poor, and more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, drop out of school, and be in trouble with the law.

For example, Whitehead points out that our system almost always places children of divorce with mothers who have the unenviable task of raising them and holding a job. The court system does a poor job in getting deadbeat parents — mostly fathers — to pay their fair share. Most fathers end up with a lifestyle as good or better than they previously enjoyed.

Unmarried mothers — and there are more and more of them every day — are usually not so fortunate as to have a house, a career, or significant assets. Their children are disadvantaged from birth and rarely, if ever, catch up.

As a society, even recognizing the damage of single parenting to childhood is a change. More commonly, our media celebrate alternatives to the nuclear family and offer self-help to struggling single parents. They run upbeat stories of those "making it" (they're usually celebrities with six- or seven-figure incomes) or, in keeping with growing sensationalism, amplify the unspoken ills of abuse and incest that are, sadly, a part of the traditional model.

In professional circles, any constellation of parent and child is called a family, perhaps in weary recognition of the continuing degradation of the nuclear unit most of us grew up with and our need to deal with today's alternatives. In spite of these accommodations, Whitehead's article argues strongly that in the changing social fabric, certain inherent economic and social

realities of life can't be overcome and a two-parent family gives a child a distinct advantage.

The effect on dental practice mirrors the overall effect on life. Consider:

- Children of single parents are often on welfare or without dental coverage.
- Divorce often clouds responsibility for payment and consent.
- Our employees are often single mothers with parenting responsibilities that can impact their job performance.
- How often have we asked important health questions of grandparents or a current lover helping out with a child's health care?
- Who can deny that the emotions of family disintegration often show up in the dental chair? These kids are more likely to show up as abuse statistics as well.

Even if you claim that you haven't seen any of this, as a taxpayer you have been touched by the problem — your tax dollars help support these children.

It's unlikely that Whitehead's article or any government program will right this trend. It is a disturbing side of our society that can only be addressed head on because it is intertwined with so many ills of contemporary life, like crime and poor school performance. We've moved to societal values that benefit adults at the expense of children, and we've placed our happiness and fulfillment ahead of our children's. It is a cultural snowball that grows larger and moves faster downhill each day.

Read Whitehead's article if you have the chance. You may not agree with all that is said, but the information is valuable for those working with children. During these holiday times, the effects of family disruption are often amplified as children are pulled various ways — physically from parent to parent, and emotionally by the dynamics of this way of life or memories of what once was. As professionals, the gifts we can give our patients include stability and understanding and it's important we recognize and adapt to what is happening around us and to those we treat. By century's end, every other child will experience a part of childhood in a single-parent family.

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