



**European Expert Group Meeting  
“Confronting family poverty and social exclusion;  
ensuring work-family balance;  
advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity  
in Europe”**

Convened as part of preparations for the  
Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014  
(Cfr. Report of the Secretary-General ,  
Preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the  
International Year of the Family in 2014,  
A/67/61-E/2012/3)

**6-8 June 2011**

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Improving intergenerational relations  
and children's well-being focusing on  
parents' relationship quality:  
**family break-up and parental conflict**

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## Key message:

In order to improve intergenerational relations and children's well-being is necessary to focus on the **quality of parents' relationship**.

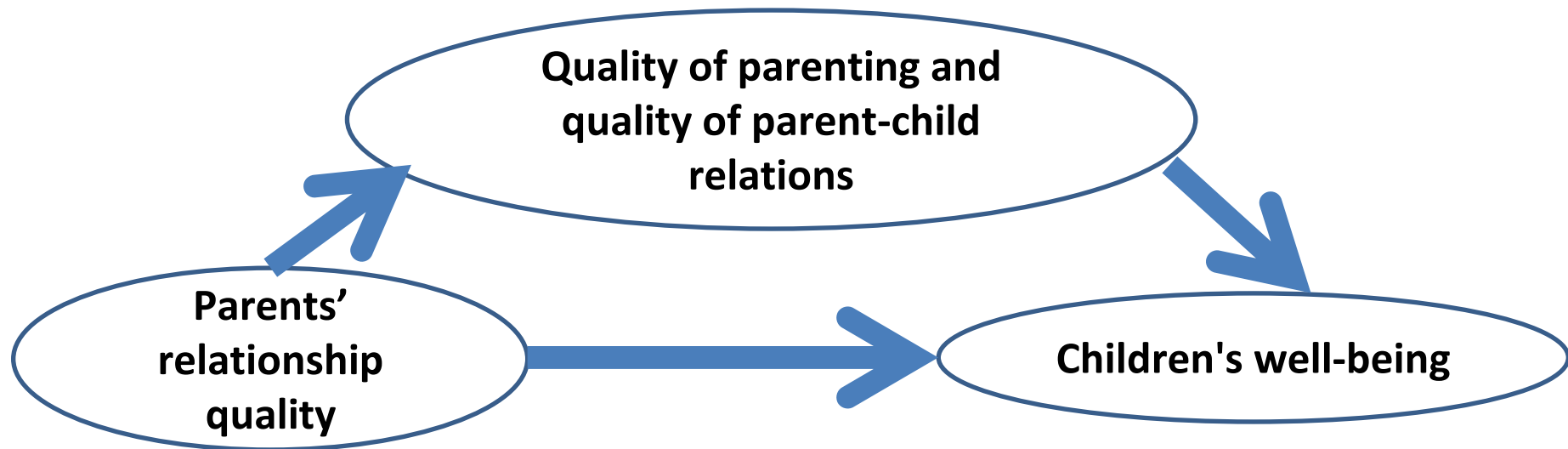
**Social problems that affects parents' relationship quality**

1- Increase of divorce

2- In spite of the increase of divorce and liberalization of divorce laws, an important proportion of children from intact families continue to experience parental conflict

## Research on parents' relationship quality in intact families

1- **Parent's relationship quality** has a **indirect and direct effect** on children's well-being.



Focusing only on parenting might be less effective than focusing on parents' relationship and parenting.

2- Parent's relationship quality and quality of parent-child relations are more important for **disadvantaged children**.

**Relations are protective factors**

# What do we know after three decades of research?

At the beginning of this research Hypothesis 1:

Parental divorce does **not have negative consequences** If it is the case:

- Effects are only **short term** rather than **long term**.
- Parental divorce only affects children's **stress**
- This **association** is not **causal** is due to parental conflict

## Today, we know Hypothesis 1:

Parental divorce affects **several dimensions of the well-being** and has **long term effects**

Some **adult outcomes** such as educational level and parent-child contacts quality of the relationship in adulthood

Also, parental divorce increases **the risk that children experience divorce from their own marriages**. Therefore, parental divorce might have **consequences over generations**

**Generation 1 : experience divorce**



**Generation 2: few parent-child relations and divorce**



**Generation 3: few parent-child relations and divorce**

Causality: ? ? But some American studies show that

- Divorce may benefit children that live in high-conflict families (stress-relief) but it is harmful for children that live in low-conflict families, (divorce is unexpected event....)
- Divorce from high conflict families is decreasing and the divorce of low conflict families is increasing .

Key message: the most harmful divorce is the type of divorce that is increasing, but more research is needed

	Divorce
High conflict	-----20 %
Low conflict	++++increasing

# What we know after three decades of research?

Hypothesis 2: The effect of parental divorce will disappear when this new phenomenon will be **more common** and society will be more **adapted** to it (Liberal divorce laws, no social stigma, generous family policies..)

- Most studies comparing different generations show that this effect **is not decreasing over time**.
- The effect of parental divorce **is not lower in Scandinavian countries than in other countries** in spite of the generosity of their welfare state.

WHY????? More research is needed



## A concern about an important social change:

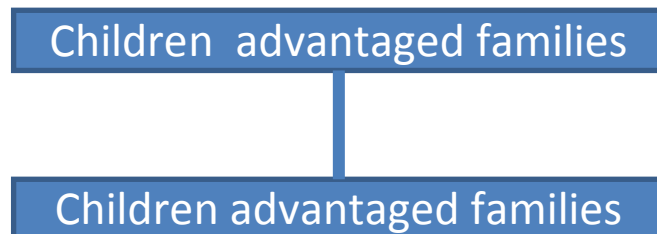
Hypothesis: **inequalities on children's well-being** may be increasing because of **inequalities on family relations** are increasing.

Parental divorce **is more** common among **disadvantaged families**.

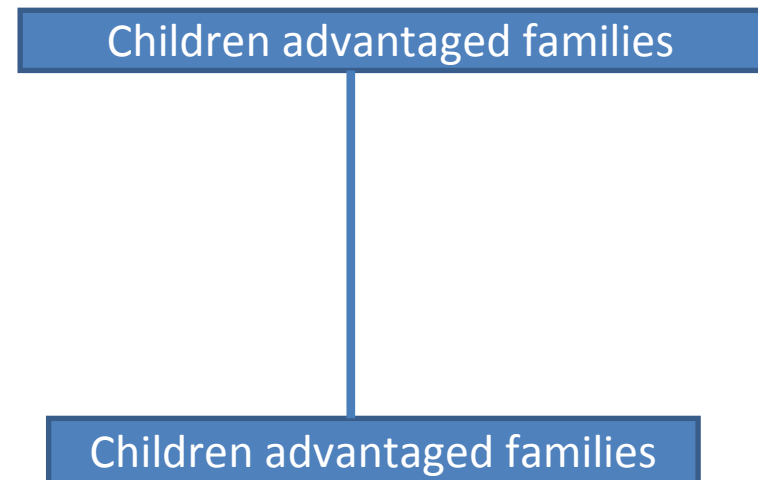
As a consequence of parental divorce, children from disadvantaged families lose **two protective factors parent's relationship quality and parent-child relations**.

**Family relations are unequally distributed!!!**

Before divorce



After divorce



## Policy recommendation 1a More Research

Although, **one million of Europeans are divorcing every year**, but there are much fewer studies on the divorce and relationship quality in Europe than in the United States.

We are not studying and important social transformations, there are few research projects on these topics

### **MORE EUROPEAN RESEARCH IS NEEDED.**

- In order to **DEVELOP EFECTIVE FAMILY POLICIES**
- **EUROPEAN POLITICAL AGENDA**

### **European research agenda should focus on**

Interrelationship between divorce and parental conflict

Polarization

Factors that promote parents' relationship quality before divorce

Factors that promote co-parenting after divorce ....

# Policy recommendation 1a: More data

We do not have enough data to study these topics

Following the example of the Generations and Gender Survey my policy recommendation is to undertake **a longitudinal cohort survey of families and children in all the European countries, following the example of Millennium Cohort Study.**

**Second best solution, to improve the quality of existing data such as Gender and Generations Survey and PISA...**

## Policy recommendation 2:

All European countries have developed **traditional policies** to create better conditions for families –**by means of financial transfers, parental leave and childcare-** in order to promote children's development.

**These are important but they are not enough:**

- The negative effect of parental divorce **is not less marked in Scandinavian countries** than in other Western countries.
- Traditional family policies do not take into consideration **children experiencing family conflict whose parents do not divorce.**

What can we do?

## Policy recommendation 2: Policies promoting parent's relationship quality

**New international trend:** in order to address these issues, **over the last fifteen years**, governments in various countries -such as the United States and Norway - have adopted **policies aimed at fostering relationship quality in partnerships.**

- The basic idea behind these new policies is that **improving the quality of partnership relationships** makes it possible to avoid both **family conflict and divorce**, and to foster **children's well-being** and **intergenerational relations.**

**Policy recommendation 2** Policymakers from European countries should follow the evaluations of American projects on parents' relationship quality. Important information *about what works in this area for child well-being.*

American Administration has invested in **three large-scale, multisite, long-term evaluation projects**: the *Supporting Healthy Marriages Project; Building Strong Families Project and Community Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Evaluation (CHRMEE)*.

## Policy recommendation 3:

### Creation of “Centres for family well-being”

a) Integrated services: High quality childcare and parenting and parents' relationship quality programs

1-children's first years of life are crucial

2-parents experience a **deterioration in the quality of their relationship** after the birth of their first child

**3-to reach most families and families without problems** since if programmes on relationship are run in a centre without childcare, parents may think that they are only for those with “problems”.

c) Including several services for families such as employment support:

It is therefore not possible to enhance the relationship quality of a couple if one of the partners is unemployed by simply providing a marriage education workshop; we should also help this partner to find a job.

d) **Evaluations:** as a first step governments should create few centres, and then they could build new ones if the evaluations are positive

## Policy recommendation 4:

- all public policies -such as health or education services- should take the perspective of relationship quality into account.
- For example, in the report “Marriage and Relationship Factors in Health: Implications for Improving Health Care Quality and Reducing Costs”, Staton & Ooms provide some tools and program models designed to strengthen couple relationships that could be adapted and integrated into the health care system.



Key messages: Parents' relationship quality matters

Governments should promote more research on these issues and policies promoting parents' relationship quality