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Improving intergenerational relationship
focusing on parents' relationship quality:
family break-up and parental conflict

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Key messages

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

-   Parental divorce is negatively associated to children's well-being.

-   Parental divorce reduces the quality and the quantity of contacts between the child and the non-resident parent. Parental divorce is associated with weak parent-child ties in adulthood.

-   More research is needed in order to determine if parental divorce is harmful for children from low-conflict families and is beneficial for children from high-conflict families.

-   Research also shows that parental conflict is linked with a poor parent-child relationship and parental conflict is negatively associated to children's well-being.

-   Some evidence suggests that the quality of the parent-child relationship and the quality of the parents' relationship are protective factors for disadvantaged children. Nowadays, poor children have not only more chances to experience parental divorce but also to lose the positive influence of protective factors such as parent-child relations and parent's relationship quality.

-   Traditional family policies, which are based on economic transfers and measures of balancing work and family life, do not eliminate the negative effects of parental conflict and parental divorce on children's well-being and intergenerational relations. Therefore, new family policies should be developed.

-   In order to ameliorate European family polices, first of all we should improve our knowledge about European families. For this reason, a longitudinal and cross-national survey that specifically studies parental divorce, parents' relationship quality, children's well-being and intergenerational relations should be created.

-   Policies promoting parents' relationship quality might improve children's well-being and intergenerational relationship. For this reason, Centres for Family Well-being that provide parenting and parents' relationship quality programs, high-quality childcare and other services for families should be established.

Introduction

Today, children are living in a world that is changing far more dramatically than it was a century or even several decades ago. As Pryor and Rodgers (2001) note, far more significant than Internet-driven changes, or the possibilities of genetic engineering are transfor-

mations in the most fundamental of structures: the family. Family change is not new, since some children in the past also did not live their entire childhood with their two biological parents, because of parental death, one parent leaving home or being imprisoned. What is different today? The main reason for family change is not more death, but parental separation or divorce. The percentage of children experiencing parental separation is higher today than in the past since while parental separation or divorce was rare in most western countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, today it is a life experience for an increasing proportion of western children. In the European Union of 27, divorce rates rose by 250 per cent in forty years, since the number of divorces per 1,000 people increased from 0.8 in 1968 to 2.0 in 2008 (Eurostat). Furthermore, since the new millennium, around one million Europeans have divorced each year, and many of them have children. The number of cohabiting couples with children is also increasing in all OECD countries, and these couples appear to be less stable than married couples (Kiernan, 2004).

These changes have led to various concerns, some of which focus on their economic implications, others on the effects on children's development, and still others that see them as moral problems linked to the breakdown of the family as an institution (Ellwood & Jencks 2004). In this paper, we focus on the second concern, i.e. the effects of parental divorce on children's development, taking into account various dimensions of children's well-being, and especially intergenerational relations. On the other hand, in spite of changes on family structure, children's well-being and parent-child relations are not only affected by the disruption of their parents' relationship but also by the quality of their relationship, especially in intact families.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the evolution of the literature on divorce.

We then review the empirical literature on the intergenerational effects of divorce and parents' relationship quality. Finally, taking empirical research findings into account, we provide several policy recommendations in order to improve children's well-being and intergenerational relations.

A. What do we know after three decades of research on the effects of parental divorce[1] on children?

The academic and political discussion about the effects of divorce has often been highly controversial. According to Simons et al., (1996), "researchers during the 1970s and early 1980s viewed high divorce rates and a rapid rise in the number of single-parent families as an indicator of society's movement toward a more equitable, open atmosphere (...). Such normative changes were seen as healthy for both adults and children. Divorce allowed

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[1] From this section onwards, the phrase 'parental divorce' to cover both parental divorce and separation is used throughout this paper.

adults to terminate hopelessly troubled marriages, and children avoided the burden of being raised in an atmosphere of parental conflict (p.5)". In their famous book on single motherhood published in the 1990s,

McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) note that some people argue that single motherhood does not have long term consequences for children and others claim that is the major cause of children's problems; still others consider that even if single motherhood may be harmful, this topic should not be studied because it could stigmatize single mothers and their children. Since the early 1980s, research on the effects of parental divorce on children's well-being has experienced a great development, which has nuanced previous common wisdom. As Garriga & Härkönen (2009) note, in the early 1980s the common wisdom and the research hypothesis about that topic were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: In terms of children's well-being, there are no differences between those who live in an intact family and those who live in a divorced family. Even if these differences exist: 1- they are short-term rather than long-term since children only experience the negative effects of parental divorce during the first two years after divorce (Simons, et al. 1996), and/or ; 2-parental divorce only has an impact on children's emotional stress since this event does not affect other domains of children well-being (Simons, et al.1996).

Hypothesis 2: Even if research demonstrates that there are differences between children from intact families and children from divorced families in several long term dimensions of well-being, the negative association between parental divorce and children's outcomes is not causal.

There are also no differences between children from conflict-free intact families and children from divorced families that do not experience parental conflict. This means that if the effect of parental divorce is not causal, we should not worry about its increase, since this growth increases the visibility of other social problems such as family conflict, which existed even before the rise in divorce rates.

Hypothesis 3: The impact of parental divorce on children decreases over time, as this new phenomenon becomes more common and society increasingly adapts to it. If the effects of parental divorce are causal, but society can adapt to this social change, then the increase in parental divorce is not a social change that should worry us, since a new social change is less important if we can find the ways to eliminate or substantially reduce its possible negative effects.

Evidence for hypothesis 1: Long term versus short-term effects and intergenerational relations. Over the last three decades, several studies and literature reviews have shown that children from divorced families have less well-being compared to children from intact families (Amato & Keith1991a, b; Amato 2001; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). It is important to note that these differences are not only found in the level of stress after di-

vorce but also in other dimensions of children's well-being such as psychological well-being, behavioural problems, cognitive development, and parent-child relations...

Nevertheless, from a policy point of view if these differences are only short-term rather than long-term, the increase of parental divorce should not be seen as a problem, because its negative effects would disappear over time (Garriga & Härkonen, 2009). However, in recent decades, the literature has thoroughly demonstrated that there are long-term differences since the negative effect of parental divorce is shown on several adult outcomes such as educational attainment (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2005; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997), adult psychological well-being (Cherlin, Chase-Lanslade & McRae,1998; Gähler & Garriga, 2012), the frequency and quality of parent adult-child relations (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007) and divorce or marital satisfaction (Amato et al., 2007; Wolfinger, 1999). For example, Gähler & Garriga (2012) find that in a sample of Swedish young adult children (18 to 30 years old) there are important differences (around 10 %) in terms of psychological problems between those that experienced parental divorce before age 16 (52.3 %) and those that remained in intact families (43.2 %).

In addition, the effect of parental divorce on intergenerational relations might not be limited to one generation since one of the most robust findings from the literature concerns the intergenerational transmission of divorce, i.e. the higher-than average likelihood of those with divorced parents to divorce themselves (Wolfinger, 2005; Wagner & Weiβ, 2006; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008).The potential effects of parental divorce on intergenerational relations and children's well-being might therefore have an impact across several generations of a family, i.e.: the grandparents' divorce (generation 1) increases the probability of the parent's divorce (generation 2) and this affects the quantity and the quality of the relationship between the parents and children in the third generation.

Evidence for hypothesis 2: Causality. One of the most important topics in the literature on divorce has been whether the effects of divorce on children's well-being and intergenerational relations are due to this event, *per se*, or to some other family/parents characteristics which are closely associated both with the risk of divorce and children's well-being such as parental conflict (Painter & Levine, 2000; Ní Bhrolcháin, 2001; Ginther & Pollack, 2004). Several studies show that parental conflict is partly but by no means completely responsible for the association between divorce and children's well-being since there is evidence that indicates that both relationship problems have independent effects on children (Jekielek, 1998; Hanson, 1999).

Nevertheless, the causality of the divorce effect is methodologically difficult or even impossible to establish, since experimental research in this area is not feasible (Amato, 2010; Sigle-Rushton & Mclanahan, 2004).For this reason, second best solutions have been developed in the literature such as (Sigle-Rushton & Mclanahan, 2004): controlling for several characteristics before dissolution, fixed-effects models, and models that include measures of children's well-being before and after parental separation.... However, as Amato (2010) suggests, the findings of these studies that focus on average effects of parental divorce are contradictory and open to multiple interpretations, since researchers can view marital discord either as a cause of divorce or as part of the divorce processes.

Over the last two decades, several American or Canadian studies have documented a more nuanced explanation of the causality of divorce that focuses on the interaction effects between parental divorce and parents' relationship quality (Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998; Strohschein, 2005). This research shows that divorce may be beneficial for children that live in high-conflict marriages, and that the dissolution of low-conflict marriages may have harmful effects on children's well-being (Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998; Booth &Amato, 2001; Strohschein, 2005). However, few studies have analysed this issue and these ones also have several limitations such as: to our knowledge, only one study (Fomby & Osborne 2010) has focused on very young children; most research has only analysed children's psychological well-being and rarely considered other dimensions such as parent-child relations; and all studies to date have used US or Canadian data, and no European study has addressed the matter. Therefore, more research on the interaction effects between parental divorce and parents' relationship quality is needed.

Evidence for hypothesis 3: Several studies have analysed whether the impact of parental divorce on children decreases when this new phenomenon becomes more common and society increasingly adapts to it-. They have used different strategies to test this hypothesis. One strategy is to compare the effect of parental divorce across generations, using identical measures over time (e.g. Gähler & Garriga, 2012; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2005 Ely et al., 1999; Biblarz & Raftery 1999). The aim of this strategy is to test whether the effect of parental divorce is less marked in younger generations than in older generations.

The percentage of children experiencing parental divorce has increased substantially in most western societies. In spite of this common trend, western countries differ substantially as regards: a) the percentage of children living in disrupted families; b) the social stigma associated to them; c) the development of family polices and d) the degree of the liberalization of their divorce laws. A second strategy is therefore to compare countries with different divorce rates, divorce laws, family policies, and social attitudes towards divorce (e.g. Garriga, 2010; Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Engelhardt, Trappe & Dronkers, 2002; Ely et al., 2000). In addition, this strategy specially focuses on examining if the impact of parental divorce is weaker in Scandinavian countries than in other western countries. Since according to Breivik & Olweus (2006), a fairly common view holds that the risk of negative outcomes for children associated with family dissolution is generally small or even non-existent in Scandinavia, since the number of divorces and separations are relatively high in these countries and they have adopted some of the world's most liberal divorce laws and implemented some of the most generous welfare states.

A third strategy is to compare results from studies conducted in different decades (e.g. Amato & Keith, 1991a; Amato, 2001) and in different countries (Chapple & Richardson, 2009). Although more research is needed, most studies show that there is no evidence for the decreasing effect of parental divorce since it seems that the effect of parental divorce is

not less in younger generations[2] than in older generations and this effect is not lower in Scandinavian countries than in other western countries.

Why does the effect of parental divorce not decrease? Gähler & Garriga (2012) note two possible mechanisms. Amato (2001) formulates an argument against the decreasing hypothesis that is linked to family conflict prior to divorce. As mentioned above, divorce is more harmful for children coming from families with a low level of conflict than those coming from families with a high level of conflict, and some evidence suggests that this type of divorce has become more common (Gähler & Garriga, 2012). Thus, if the most harmful divorce has become more common we would not expect the negative effect of parental divorce to have decreased across generations (Gähler & Garriga, 2012).

Another argument points to the evolution of the social composition of divorce (Gähler & Garriga, 2012). Goode's (1962, 1970, 1993) theory, and some empirical studies (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006; Chan & Halpin, 2009) suggest that when divorce is rare, it is more common among the upper class, and when it is widespread it is more common among the lower class. Nowadays, in some western countries parental divorce is more common among lower (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006; Chan & Halpin, 2009) class. Garriga (2010) finds support for the hypothesis derived from Goode's theory according to which in countries where mothers from disrupted families are better educated than mothers of two-parent families, the risk of children growing up in a single-mother family arriving late for school is less than in countries where single mothers are less educated than mothers in two-parent families. However, more research is needed on how the change in the educational gradient of divorce affects children's well-being.

B. Intact families: the importance of the parents' relationship quality

Research has shown a clear association between parents' relationship quality and children's well-being (e.g. Buehler et al., 1997; Kouros, Cummings & Davies, 2010) and the quality of parent-child relations and parenting (see Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buelher, 2000). Several studies show that parents' relationship quality can influences children's well-being both directly and indirectly through parent-child interactions (e.g. Buehler & Gerard 2002; Gerard et al., 2006).

Is the effect of family relations stronger on children from disadvantaged backgrounds? There is some evidence that shows that quality of parenting and quality of parent-child relationship are more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kim, 2002; Marí-Klose et al., 2008). Furthermore, Garriga & Kiernan (forthcoming) find that the effect of parent's relationship quality on externalizing problems is stronger among poor children than among rich children. Parent-child relations and parents' relationship quality seems to be therefore protective factors for disadvantaged children.

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[2] Wolfinger (1999, 2011) shows that the positive relationship between parental divorce and own divorce has attenuated over time.

These finding are particularly important if we take into account that today, unlike previous decades, in most western countries disadvantaged children are more likely to experience parental divorce than advantaged children. As a consequence, poor children nowadays are not only more likely to experience their parents' divorce but also to lose the positive influence of protective factors such as the quality of parent-child relations and the quality of parent's relationship. These family changes may increase inequalities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, more research on the interrelationship between parental divorce, family relationship factors and socio-economic characteristics of the family is needed.

C. Policy recommendations

1. A cross-national longitudinal survey of families and children

In order to develop effective family policies aimed at promoting children's well-being and intergenerational relations, it is necessary to have a clear diagnosis of the state of the family and children in Europe. In fact, a careful diagnosis is the first step in a successful public policy. However, in my opinion we still do not have a clear analysis of the family factors that have a harmful or protective influence on children's well-being and intergenerational relations. For example, on the one hand, there are far fewer studies on the effects of parental divorce on children in Europe than in the United States. Furthermore, we have little information about the factors that promote co-parenting and parent-child relations in divorced families. In addition, compared with the American literature, there are few studies that analyse the link between parents' relationship quality and children's well-being and intergenerational relations using samples from European countries. The same is true for research examining the factors that promote parents' relationship quality. We have little information on the relationships between the change of the educational gradient of divorce, parental divorce, parents' relationship quality and children's well-being. But why is there this lack of European research on parents' relationship quality and divorce?

The most reasonable explanation is that in Europe, few countries carry out longitudinal surveys, and in those that do, the most important aim of these surveys is not to study divorce or relationship quality and children's well-being, but instead the family's living conditions and economic characteristics. Important information that is necessary to study these topics is therefore missing.

Moreover, all European countries share common characteristics but diverge in terms of their levels of welfare generosity and cultural values. For this reason, cross-national analyses comparing several European countries are very important in order to identify the macro-level factors influencing parental divorce, parents' relationship, children's well-being and intergenerational relations. However, the few cross-national longitudinal surveys that do exist were not created specifically to study these issues. For example, the goal of the survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) is to study the ageing

process, and it contains little information about children and divorce. The Generations and Gender Survey, coordinated by the Population Activities Unit of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, cover topics such as fertility, partnership, transition to adulthood, economic activity as well as intergenerational and gender relations. Nevertheless, this survey only contains retrospective information on parental divorce and adult outcomes since it is based on a sample of the 18-79 year-old resident population in each participating country.

In my opinion, the best surveys for studying children's well-being are the longitudinal cohort surveys such as the Millennium Cohort Study 2000. This survey follows a generation of British children born in 2000 and includes a great deal of information about their development and family life. However, some important variables are missing. For example, there is some information on parents' relationship quality such as parents' relationship satisfaction, but other dimensions of relationship quality such as conflict, compromise, and forgiveness are not measured. There is also some information about the frequency of contacts between the child and the non-resident parent after divorce, but other important factors that are necessary to understand the divorce process, such as co-parenting or the quality of relationship between the child and the non-resident parent, are not taken into account.

My first policy recommendation is therefore to undertake a longitudinal cohort survey of families and children in all the European countries, following the example of Millennium Cohort Study and adding the missing information. I am fully aware that this is a difficult goal taking the European economic situation into account. However, as mentioned above, if policymakers do not have a complete analysis of the factors that influence children's well-being and intergenerational relations in European countries, it is very difficult to develop effective family policies. A second-best solution is to improve the quality of the existing surveys by adding some questions that are necessary to study these issues. For instance, Generations and Gender Survey may be useful in order to analyse the factors that predict relationship quality, but this survey takes into account few dimensions of relationship quality and new questions about satisfaction, compromise and forgiveness should therefore be added. Another example is the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) database, which is organized and conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and aims to provide internationally comparable measurement on the performance of 15 year-old students. A limitation of PISA is that it contains information about family structure, but no information on the causes of the current family types. Single-mother families or mother and stepfather families may be due to divorce or separation, to the death of a parent or to the parents never having lived together. Adding only a question to clarify this issue would improve the quality of the survey. It could be also possible to include some questions about the quality of the parent-child relationship and the frequency of contact with the non-resident father.

2. From traditional family policies to policies promoting parents' relationship quality

Traditional family policies are those that have been most extensively developed and implemented by governments in order to help families in general and single-parent families in particular. The aim of these policies is to create better conditions for families –by means of financial transfers, parental leave and childcare- in order to promote children's development. Traditional policies explicitly or implicitly assume that the causal or selection negative effects of parental divorce, such as parental conflict, can be solved after parental separation by improving financial resources in the family and childcare and parental leave policies. But are these policies efficient?

On the one hand, several studies show that in countries where these policies are most highly developed, such as in Scandinavia, few single mothers are poor (Vleminckx & Smeeding 2000; Heuveline & Weinshenker 2008). However, in spite of this, the negative effect of parental divorce on children's well-being and intergenerational relations is not less marked in Scandinavian countries than in other Western countries (Chapple & Richardson, 2009; Albertini & Garriga, 2011). It therefore seems that these policies are not enough to eliminate the selection (parental conflict) or causal effect of parental divorce and single motherhood. On the other hand, traditional family policies do not take into consideration children experiencing family conflict whose parents do not divorce. In fact, there is some evidence that in Sweden a non-negligible percentage of children from intact families experienced parental conflict during childhood and this percentage has slightly increased in younger cohorts of intact families in spite of the generosity of the country's welfare state (Bernhardt, Gähler & Goldscheider, 2005; Gähler & Garriga, 2012).

In order to address these issues, over the last fifteen years, governments in various countries with different welfare state regimes and cultural values - such as the United States and Norway - have adopted policies aimed at fostering relationship quality in partnerships. In all western countries, marriage counselling or education services provided by private psychologists or social organizations have existed for some time. What is different today is that some governments have started to fund these services. This is a new international trend that has not been systematically studied, and which represents a substantial transformation of family policies. 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.

In fact, there is some evidence related to this issue: researchers and practitioners argue that marital therapy is likely to be only modestly successful, given that couples are often seriously distressed by the time they seek help (Christesen & Heavey, 1999). In contrast, a number of reviews suggest that relationship education is effective (e.g., Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2008; Hawkins & Ooms, 2010). Furthermore, Stanley et al., (2006) using a large random survey of 4 middle American states, find that participation in pre-marital education is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in marriage and lower levels of conflict — and also a reduced likelihood of divorce. Because these

estimated effects are robust across race, income (including among the poor), and education levels, the authors consider that participation in premarital education is generally beneficial for a wide range of couples.

Another important characteristic of these policies is the causal model that is assumed. In several countries, parenting programmes have been developed to improve children's well-being (Sanders & Murphy-Brennan, 2010). However, although programs on relationship quality have the same goal as parenting programmes which is improving children's well-being, they adopt another causal model and intervention strategy. They focus on parents' relationship quality to improve both the quality of parenting and the quality of parent-child relationship and children's well-being. In fact, some research suggests that using this strategy may be more useful for increasing children's well-being since as mentioned parents' relationship quality has both a direct effect on children's well-being and indirect effect through parent-child interactions (e.g. Buehler & Gerard, 2002).

The American policies are analysed in more depth in this paper, since that is where they have been implemented most extensively. In 2002, the Administration for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services launched a Healthy Marriage Initiative. Around 200 programmes were financed by the Healthy Marriage Initiative, without taking into account programmes funded by the States (Hawkins et al., 2009). The Administration for Children and Families has also invested in three large-scale, multisite, long-term evaluation projects: the Supporting Healthy Marriages Project, focusing on low-income married couples with children; the Building Strong Families Project, focusing on low-income unmarried parents recruited around the time of the birth of their first child and Community Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Evaluation (CHRMEE).These programmes are designed for low-income couples, because in the United States (and in most other western countries) these couples are most likely to experience the breakdown of their relationship (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006; Cherlin, 2010). There is strong evidence that marriage education can generally be effective in improving relationship satisfaction and communication among white and highly educated couples, but less is known about whether these programmes, including those that have been carefully adapted, will work with more diverse and less advantaged individuals (Dion, 2005). There is also no empirical evidence that marriage education programmes can increase the well-being of children (Dion, 2005). For these reasons, the aim of these evaluations is to test whether these programmes are effective for low-income couples and their children.

As Hawkins & Ooms (2010) suggest, "the results of the large-scale impact evaluation studies (BSF, SHM and CHMREE) in the coming years will provide more complete and rigorous evidence of the longer-term efficacy and viability of MRE programs and their potential benefits for couples, their children, and the communities in which they reside (p.3)". My second policy recommendation is therefore that policymakers from European countries should follow the evaluations of these projects. For this reason, I summarize the main characteristics of one of these programmes.

The Supporting Healthy Marriages Project, launched in 2003, focuses on low-income married couples with children, who were enrolled in eight programmes across the United States (Hawkins & Ooms, 2010). Most marriage education programmes only focus on the

couple relationship process (Knox & Fein, 2009). However, several personal, family, and community demographic factors are associated with relationship quality and divorce (Amato, Johnson, Booth & Rogers, 2003). These factors are especially important for low-income couples (Knox & Fein, 2009). For this reason, this programme focuses on three levels: the personal strengths and vulnerabilities of the partners such as mental health and substance abuse; relationships insights, values, expectations, and skills and external influences and the macro context (Knox & Fein, 2009).

The core of each programme is 24 to 30 hours of marriage education workshops provided in a group setting, over several (typically two to four) months. The first three areas of the curriculum cover traditional concerns of marriage education, such as understanding marriage, managing conflict and promoting positive connections between spouses (Knox &Fein, 2009). Other areas of the curriculum are designed to provide insights and skills pertinent to several broad external challenges. These areas include strengthening relationships beyond the couple; enhancing the couple's ability to manage challenging external circumstances such as mental health problems, financial stress and strengthening parenting. The second component of this programme is engaging participants in additional activities for a full year (about nine months beyond the core programme) (Knox & Fein, 2009). Examples of the activities are booster sessions, one-on-one coaching mentoring by programme staff or peers, and activities for the whole family. The third component is to help couples gain access to a wide range of services and supports, such as physical or mental health services, substance abuse treatment, housing assistance, employment and training services, and childcare (Knox & Fein, 2009).

Random assignment design, the most rigorous standard for policy evaluation, is used to evaluate this project. The evaluation takes place in several domains of family functioning: marital quality; marital duration and stability; the mental health and employment status of each individual spouse; family income; co-parenting and parenting behaviour; and the children's well-being, including direct assessments of children's cognitive and behavioural development (Knox & Fein, 2009). These potential programme impacts are measured at 12 and 36 months after random assignment —and possibly at 60 months if earlier findings reveal impacts (Knox and Fein, 2009). Hsueh et al., 2012 show that short term evaluations -one year after couples enter the study- "provide some encouraging evidence that a couples-based, family-strengthening intervention can yield positive effects when delivered on a large scale to low- to modest-income couples with diverse backgrounds (p.5)". Nonetheless, as these authors point out, "the importance of the short-term impacts, however, will ultimately depend on whether the program yields positive long term impacts on marital stability and parents' and children's well-being over time (p.5)"

3. Sure Start Centres: What can we do after divorce?

One policy that has obtained successful results in terms of improving the quality of parenting in single parent-families is the Sure Start Centres. These centres, which have been in place in the United Kingdom since the late 1990s, aim to overcome the segmentation of

family policies, and to promote parenting and the family's emotional well-being at the same time. These centres originated from the Cross-Departmental Review of Services for Young Children. This Review concluded that: 1-disadvantage among young children was increasing and it was more likely that poor outcomes could be prevented when early intervention was undertake, and; 2- that the services being provided were uncoordinated and patchy, and recommended a change in service design and delivery (Melhuish, Belsky & Barnes, 2010).It suggested that programmes should be jointly planned by all relevant bodies, and be area-based, with all children under four years old in an area and their families being clients. Some characteristics of this programme are:

1. This is based on the scientific evidence that the children's first years of life are crucial in fostering their future development. Several services related to this specific stage of the family development are therefore provided. For example, in order to promote children's development, some centres offer high quality childcare or give parents information on other good quality care providers.

2. Using an integrated approach, these centres provide various kinds of services, ranging from parenting to employment support and family health.

3. Most centres are in disadvantaged areas. The goal is to reach most families, and especially most disadvantaged families such as single parents, living or not in deprived areas. The latter have less contact with the mainstream services than other family types. Several methods are used in order to reach these families such as home visiting

4. These centres use a multi-agency approach, which means working in partnership with other public agencies and social organizations.

Several evaluations of Sure Start programmes were carried out. Previous evaluations of the efficacy of this programme were inconclusive, and several changes were introduced for this reason (Melhuish, Belsky & Barnes, 2010). Subsequent evaluations showed that this programme has positive effects on parents and children (Melhuish, Belsky & Barnes, 2010). Melhuish et al., (2008) in their longitudinal investigation of children and families seen at 9 months and 3 years of age, comparing children in Sure Start areas with those in similar non-Sure Start areas, reveal beneficial effects for children and families living in Sure Start areas, when the children were 3 years old. Children in Sure Start areas show better social development, exhibiting more positive social behaviour and greater independence/self-regulation than their counterparts in non-Sure Start areas. This result is partially a consequence of parents in Sure Start areas manifesting less negative parenting, as well as a better home learning environment. The effects of Sure Start programmes seem to apply to all subpopulations, including single parents. In addition, families in Sure Start areas use more services for supporting child and family development than those not living in these areas. For these reasons, policymakers should in my opinion take future evaluations of this programme into account, in order to determine whether these programmes could be suitable for implementation in other countries.

4. A policy recommendation: Centres for Family Well-being

As mentioned above, traditional family policies based on family transfers and measures that help families to balance work and family life do not solve most of the problems related to children's and family well-being. In other words, it is not enough to offer good conditions for the families, but instead it is also necessary to improve what I call the emotional and relationship dimension of the family. For this reason, my final policy recommendation is the creation of centres for families following the philosophy of Sure Start centres. However, they should put more emphasis on promoting parents' relationship quality before and after separation since as mentioned above: (1) before separation, parents' relationship quality is associated to children's well-being and family stability and (2), cooperative co-parenting predicts more frequent father-child contact, which in turn predicts a higher relationship quality and more responsive fathering, and these factors are associated to children's well-being after divorce (Sobolewski & King, 2005; King & Sobolewski, 2006).The main characteristics of these Centres for Family Well-being should be:

Centres should be area based and these should also offer high quality childcare for two main reasons. First, children's first years of life are crucial in fostering their future development.

Second, parents experience a deterioration in the quality of their relationship after the birth of their first child (Doss et al., 2009).During the first years of the child's life, parents therefore need special support in their role of partners and parents. However, what can we do to make most families follow a parenting or parents' relationship quality programme? In contrast to American policies on parents' relationship quality, I believe that is really important to offer both services- childcare and parenting and parents' relationship quality programmes- in the same centre. In my opinion it is easier to reach parents if they receive support from a centre that they usually attend than if they have to go to a specific centre where they only go for a parents' relationship programme. In fact, if these programmes are run in a centre without childcare, parents may think that they are only for those with "problems". Second, it is also reasonable to think that is easier to provide long term support for relationship quality and parenting in a centre with childcare than in a centre without this service, since parents continue to maintain their contact with the centre through their children.

Integrated services. Sure Start Centres does not only focus on parenting, but also provide other services such as employment support and family health. Different kinds of services are necessary to improve relationship quality and parenting. Since, for example, research shows that unemployment is negatively associated to relationship quality (Hansen, 2005).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. Furthermore, professionals at the centres should help couples gain access to a wide range of services and supports that are not provided in the centres.

Evaluation. Centres for Family Well-being and all the programmes that they offer should be carefully evaluated. Indeed, as a first step governments should create few centres, and then they could build new ones if the evaluations are positive.

Finally, besides the creation of the Centres for Family Well-being, 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 (2011) provide some tools and program models designed to strengthen couple relationships that could be adapted and integrated into the health care system.

D. Conclusions

Most studies show that parental divorce is negatively associated with children's well-being and intergenerational relations. More research is needed in order to determine if parental divorce is harmful for children from low-conflict families and is beneficial for children from high-conflict families. Parents' relationship quality has a positive effect on the well-being of children from intact families. Some studies suggest that among disadvantaged children, parent-child relations and parents' relationship quality are protective factors. Today, poor children are not only more likely to experience parental divorce but also to lose the positive influence of protective factors such as the quality of parent-child relationship and parent's relationship quality. These family changes may increase inequalities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

In order to ameliorate European family polices, first of all we should improve our knowledge about European families. For this reason, a longitudinal and cross-national survey that specifically studies parental divorce, parents' relationship quality, children's well-being and intergenerational relations should be created. Traditional family policies -which are based on economic transfers and measures to balance work and family life –do not seem to eliminate the negative effects of parental conflict and parental divorce on children's well-being and intergenerational relations. Policies promoting parents' relationship quality might improve children's well-being and intergenerational relationships. For this reason, Centres for Family Well-being that provide parenting and parents' relationship quality programmes, high-quality childcare and other services for families should be created.

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