

Child abuse by family structure

Why we should promote marriage to protect children



Introduction

The forthcoming children rights referendum correctly focuses public attention on the all-important topic of child welfare.

As everyone with an interest in this issue acknowledges, child welfare depends on far more than an amendment to the Constitution, no matter how well that is worded.

For example, a crucial issue is the level of resources made available to the State's child welfare services.

Another is the provision of proper training for those working in such services. Yet another is to ensure our child welfare and protection services are run as well and efficiently as possible.

But another is the family structure in which children find themselves, that is, married, unmarried, single parent etc because levels of child abuse vary greatly according to family structure.

Abuse by family type: The protective effect of marriage

Research shows that the family in which children are least likely to be abused is the family headed by married, biological parents, that is, by a child's natural mother and father.

This is demonstrated by one of the most comprehensive studies ever conducted on this topic, namely a report to the US Congress in 2010 called the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect.

The table below, from that report, shows in very clear terms that by far the safest place for a child is to be with his or her biological married parents.

For example, children raised by their married, biological parents are 20 times less likely to be sexually abused than children raised by a lone parent and a partner not related to the child.

The natural conclusion to be drawn from this is that we ought to do much more to support and strengthen the married, biological family.

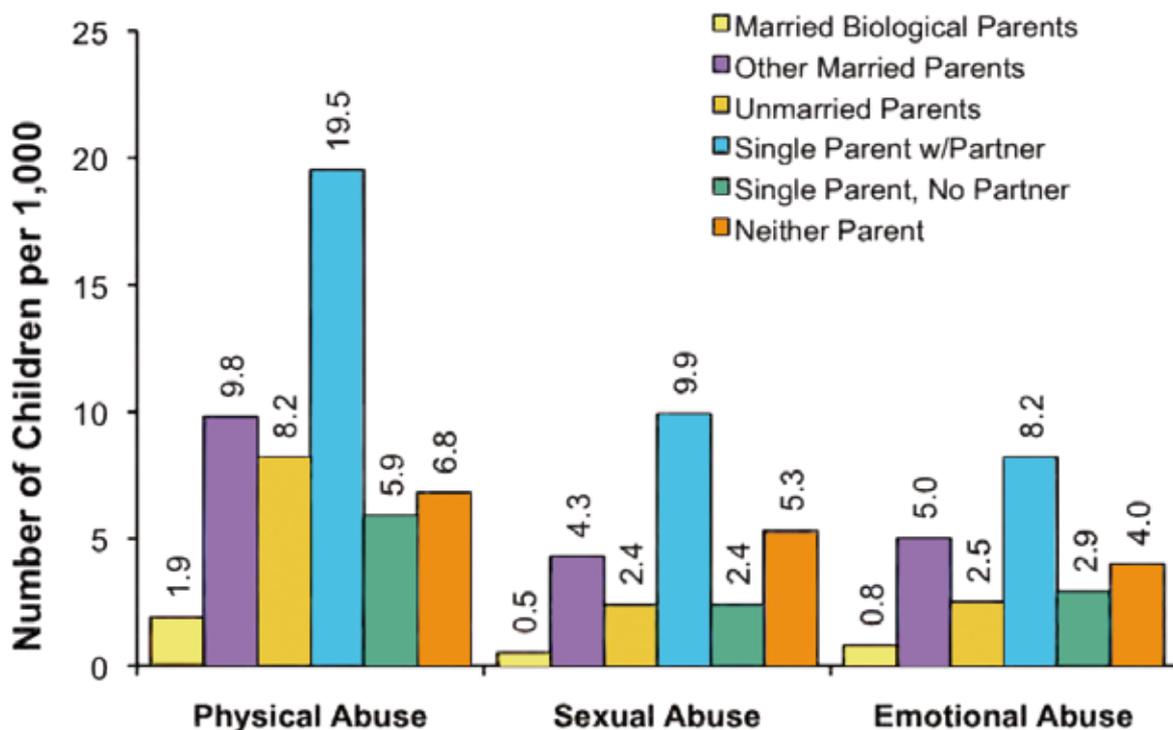


Table: Incidence of Harm Standard Abuse by Family Structure and Living Arrangement. From the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. Report to US Congress 2010.

The number of Irish children being raised outside marriage

According to Census data from the CSO, as at 1986, just 12 percent of Irish children under the age of 18 were being raised outside the marital family. As at Census 2011, this had soared to 28 percent, or 455,000 children in total.

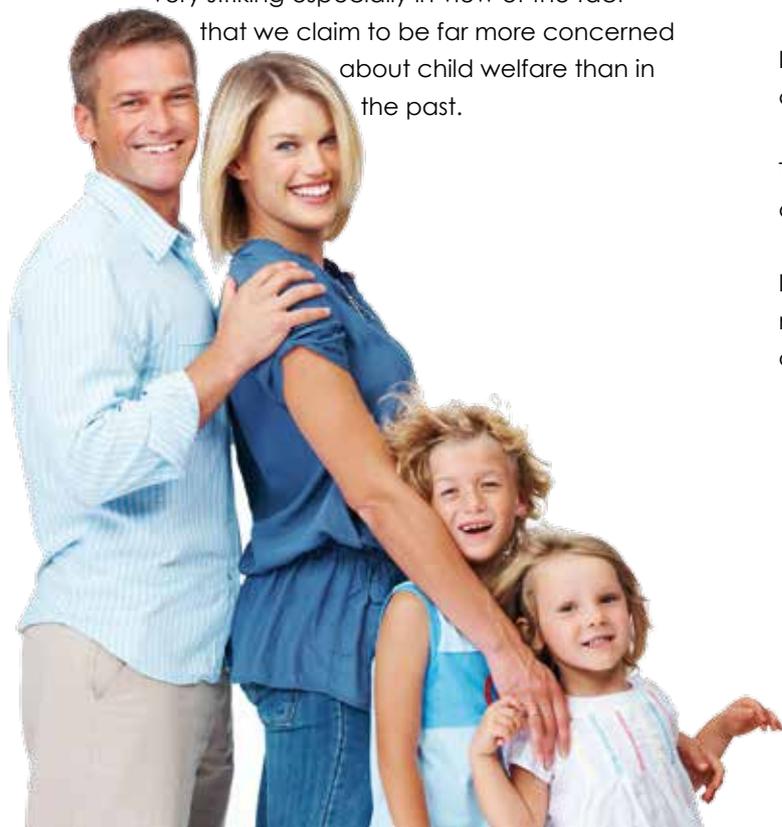
This has to be a cause for concern especially when we consider that apart from the issue of abuse, children raised by their married, biological parents are also more likely to fare well emotionally, educationally etc than children raised in other families, although there will be many exceptions.

A research brief from Child Trends, a non-partisan research centre in the US, has this to say about the importance of marriage:

"Research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the family structure that helps the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage... There is thus value in promoting strong, stable marriages between biological parents".

(From 'Marriage from a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children and What Can we Do about it?')

The near silence in Ireland about this research is very striking especially in view of the fact that we claim to be far more concerned about child welfare than in the past.



By far and away the safest place for a child is in a home raised by their married, biological parents. Therefore, we should promote marriage for the sake of children.

The unavoidable conclusion: if we wish to protect children, promote marriage

Given the facts about marriage, it is quite clear that if we are serious about protecting children, then we must be much stronger and more forthright in promoting marriage and in reversing the trend that is seeing ever more Irish children being raised outside marriage.

In fact, it is the single best thing we can do for children.

This is not a question of condemning parents who are not married.

Instead we have to learn new ways of promoting marriage that are not judgemental. We owe this to our children.

About the Iona Institute

The Iona Institute promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.



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