

What Function does Marriage and the Family Play?

Sociologists, Anthropologists, Psychologists and Family Researchers point to numerous functions that marriage and family play not only for individuals but also for society at large, cultures and even nations themselves. What follows are most of these with brief explanations included with each:

Reproduction and Perpetuation of the Species: Part of living is sensing that the place where we are at will continue, that the future will exist with people in it and life will go on. Marriage and family provide the central place where reproduction can be expected to take place; thus assuring that people will exist in the future or the family lines will continue. It also provides an avenue for sexual control, for example with the incest taboo so that roles in the family are clear and not confused. The sexual control implied in most cultures by marriage itself assures an expectation of permanence and exclusiveness that is designed to reign in any tendency of either man or woman to spread their reproductive powers in as many places as they can find!

Legitimizing Sexual Relations: Without a means to identify and tie the results of any sexual act to where it came from, chaos would result, identity and connection would be fragmented and individuals would have less tying with their past, leaving a future without known connective strands. If sexuality is allowed to run rampant without boundaries, expectations, responsibilities and ties it would leave a society with no knowledge of who should do what with the results of the sex act.

Assuring a future for a nation, culture or economy: Without births, as soon as one generation died there would be no future culture, no future input into an economy, and eventually no nation left to exist. Without people in the future the very fabric of labor and economic production falls apart; local, regional and national governments cease to have human power to continue to perform functions and the result would be internal destruction. With this in mind it is easy to see why a government would have an interest in the functions of the family, as it is in the perpetuation of the species that the very future of a society eventually rests.

Economic cooperation and Division of Labor: In the process of providing a new generation, the family has tasks of financial support, physical care of any children, responsibilities to sustain itself and various tasks in all of this that must be performed by members. The family as a kind of 'micro-world' provides for economic production in a society just to sustain its needs, while at the same time acting as a consumer of countless areas of the economy at the same time. Society as an entity in and of itself counts on the family to sustain itself with labor so that job does not fall to the government, agencies, or to others not directly related to the particular family itself. The family also protects its members from want, hunger, homelessness, and provides material objects to sustain the members, helps provide for future economic security as children leave the nest, and basically in the end provide the culture, society or nation with a responsible, contributing citizen who can then provide stability for the future.

Care, Supervision, Monitoring, and Interaction, Affection, Emotional support and Companionship: Development from childhood to adulthood by nature requires some oversight, some modeling, some practice of skills, feedback, comfort and a sense that someone is there during this process. Through biological connections and/or commitment and sacrifice the family setting is

uniquely suited to provide a long term laboratory for this growth to full maturity. Research studies of individuals who were forced into isolation paint an alarming picture of what happens without input, socialization, attention, training and love. Incapable of the kinds of skills we might take for granted, they are left as only a shadow of their human potential. This is one of the most vital things society counts on the family providing, as the larger group can only provide these things periodically or only in part. Eventually as family member's age, even then the family is positioned to provide more intimate support as individuals are winding down their lives.

Establishing a Sense of Lineage and History: Some societies trace a heritage only through the father's side, others through the mother's, and many through both. In this a sense of family attributes, shared experiences, social standing, strengths, weaknesses and reputation are established. This contributes to a shared history of what came before and anticipation of what will come about next. Through this function ideally the legal father and mother of any given child is established with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that might come with that connection within a culture. In many situations there can be a clear sense of socio-economic status and reputation which aids in a child's social placement within the larger society. Ultimately this lineage can create a sense of belonging.

Socialization into Laws, Morality and Ethical Behavior: No other social institution is equipped as strongly as family to prepare a person to take their place as a productive citizen. Society counts on the family to promote law abiding behavior, adherence to acceptable norms and to contribute in some way to the health of the whole. Prisons would be more overflowing than at present without the family's channeling of its members into acceptable behavior and values. Also seen would be increased taxes to pay for monitoring deviant behavior, an increase in police oversight, more government programs designed to pick up the pieces of destructive behaviors, more laws designed to control people who cannot control themselves and ultimately less freedom of action due to this excessive need for monitoring. Indeed the foundation of a functioning society is a functioning family.