



Parents: Our expectations

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1. More to marriage than we think

We are brought into this world at the behest of two people, one male and the other female. They provide the raw materials, a sperm and an ovum, the gametes that combine to form a zygote, which attaches itself to the wall of the woman's womb where it develops into a baby. This is the natural process by which the human race reproduces itself, as do many other species. Other people such as medical practitioners may become involved to enable this happen but it is the willingness of the providers of these two cells who essentially make possible the arrival of any child on this planet. In cases where there is donation of sperm or an ovum the donor usually relinquishes any parental rights in favour of the partner of the other parent, who then effectively becomes an adoptive parent before the child is born and embraces all the usual expectations of and from a parent.¹

Essentially, it is two people who inflict themselves as parents on their children, vulnerable conscripts, to a marriage contract perhaps, to an informal partnership, or abandoned to one parent or to whatever care others are willing and able to provide. Initially at least, a child's fate is in the hands of these two people, for we all enjoy a right to be a parent and take rights over a child, rights that are recognized in law. The problem for me is that we seem far, far less concerned to uphold any rights or expectations on the part of children, the innocent parties.

What might we make of a recent report concerning the jailing of a woman who persuaded her teenage lover that he was the father of a child which was, actually, her husband's?² For three and a half years the teenager's family cared for the child, whose mother received a three year jail sentence for perjury and fraud and whose father was given a suspended jail sentence for perverting the course of justice. To whom can this child turn for continuing loving care and support? Clearly not the mother. Would we want to see the child handed to its father, who has used it as a pretext for extortion, libel and perjury? Could the foster parents be expected to

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¹ Adoptive couples take on the rights and responsibilities of the biological parents when a child has been given up or when the courts have effectively removed the child from its biological parents. Unlike them, adoptive parents' claims and responsibilities in respect of a child are shared initially by the State, which strives to establish the suitability of the adopters to undertake the role of parents.

² C. Parker, Woman jailed after telling teenage lover he was father of her child. *The Times* (8 July 2020).

continue to care for a child that they have discovered is not their grandchild? And who, at some time in the future, will explain all this to the child? Can we hope that this child will ever learn to trust and love other people? What if it does not?

2. The problem

A once delightful boy whom I taught at a boarding school was asked by his housemaster why it was that his father was unable to get along at weekends or at half-term to see him. His father was an internationally renowned sportsman with a reputation as a womanizer. The fourteen year-old's reply was immediate: "My dad spends all his spare time making brothers and sisters for me." Something of the damage that this boy had suffered in having to come to terms in this way with his father's total disinterest was revealed a year later when he was expelled from the school for, in temper, he had assaulted his roommate. Sadly he is not the only boy I have known who has found himself in a similar situation.

Traditionally marriage provided not only for the two original partners but for innocent, additional parties to the agreement who are drawn in involuntarily, the children. The uniqueness of the relationship between parent and child is still recognized; more limited expectations are made of anyone else involved with the child. Previously, longer periods of engagement before marriage allowed more time for couples to reflect upon their choice of a partner for whom they would care and with whom they were expected to form a stable and permanent relationship that would provide a secure home for their children who would, almost inevitably, arrive. Now, cohabitation no longer results almost automatically in the arrival of children; they are brought into the world as a result of adult choice.³ For parents who are married, divorce is easier than formerly and attitudes towards children and the responsibilities of those who bring them into the world seem to be changing. As Mr Justice Coleridge has remarked,⁴

Family breakdown is now a national tragedy. Our children are the losers in the game of 'pass the partner' ... But surely the test of any social change is whether it enhances people's lives or makes them more miserable. And this is where I take issue with the modern view of the family. If it is so successful, why are the statistics for separation so large? More significantly, why are the family courts overwhelmed with cases involving damaged, miserable or disturbed children? How do other children, caught up in less serious separations, really feel? Do they relish the endless changes of partner, or adapting to a new step-parent and step-siblings?

Are we now seeing "lifestyle choices" taking precedence over the responsibilities of parents? Adults, strangers, may step unchecked into a child's home, sometimes casually. Consider the advantages that an adult has over a child, which may be used to either help the child or to take advantage of the child's vulnerability. Be aware of the additional impositions on a child, a child who may already have suffered more than we would wish any child to suffer though the loss of a parent or the loss of a home. Compare the arrival of an unknown adult in a child's home, recruited at a bar or a disco perhaps, with the restrictions and protection provided for children

³ This is true even when there is no intention to bring about a pregnancy. The choice of course is the matter of deciding to engage in sexual intercourse, which implies the possibility of a child as a result.

⁴ Mr Justice Coleridge. Family breakdown is now a national tragedy. *Daily Telegraph* (17 June 2009).

who live in boarding schools or care homes. Look at Prof. Richard Whitfield's work on neonates' need to experience emotional warmth.⁵ Stories such as Cinderella serve to remind us of a long-established antipathy between a child and a step-parent.⁶ Chrissie Thomas was five years old when her widowed father remarried—and her new stepmother began a relentless round-the-clock campaign of terror against her.⁷ A practising psychologist, Carl Pickhardt, found the words with which to warn an adult who steps into a child's home:⁸

The adult companion has to understand that the single parent is married to a previous and ongoing commitment to children that will not be forsaken for dating interest or romantic attachment.

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) has researched the link between marital breakdown and crime, homelessness and alcoholism, finding that people who experienced family breakdown when aged 18 or younger were twice as likely to be in trouble with the police, and concluding⁹

The evidence is clear: family breakdown sits as the backdrop to so many broken lives, entrenching individuals in intergenerational cycles of poverty and instability.

Ramifications seem endless. How old does a child have to be before their parents should no longer be held responsible for their effectiveness of their parenting? Which is more dangerous, a teenager with a knife or a gun? What has been the fate of parents whose children kill? Do we expect more of dog owners than of parents?¹⁰

3. Attitudes

Twenty years ago Kirsty Lang wrote about her decision to continue with an unintended pregnancy, the result of “an on-off relationship with no future”, without the father; a decision to “have a child on her own”.¹¹ Of course, no one has a child on his or her own; the decision here is to exclude the father from involvement with the mother during pregnancy, during her confinement and from her life thereafter and that of the child. No further responsibility for it will be expected of the father; Lang wrote, “If I went ahead with this child I'd be doing it on my own—emotionally and financially”. The son, then two, was said to be “an integral part of an extended family unit and never questions the fact that his Daddy doesn't live with us”. Most two year-olds are not capable of framing and asking such questions. Later, when this “perfect” son of a successful mother asks the question, she will not be able to explain what earlier generations of mothers have been obliged to explain, that as a result of an accident or misfortune or war, Daddy cannot share his life with us, however much he wanted to. This woman will have to

⁵ R. Whitfield, Why we all need committed somebodies. *The Free Library*, (1 August 2003) <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Whitfield%2c+Richard-a171>

⁶ F. Childs, It's heresy to say it, but having a step-parent can wreck a child's life. *Daily Mail* (30 May 2008) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/index.html>

⁷ C. Thomas, My cruel stepmother's abuse cast a long shadow over my childhood. *The Guardian* (18 April 2014).

⁸ C.E. Pickhardt, Adolescence and the dating parent. *Psychology Today* (9 April 2012).

⁹ *Why Family Matters*. London: Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) (March 2019).

¹⁰ F. Perraudin, A man whose bull terrier attacked and killed his neighbour has been jailed for 10 years. *The Guardian* (13 February 2018).

¹¹ Reported in the *Sunday Times Magazine* on 26 March 2000; see also a letter from the present author to *The Times* on 1 April 2000.

explain that *she decided* that his father was to be excluded from his life and that, presumably, his father agreed to this, if, that is, he was even told about the pregnancy. What might her son be able to make of this?

Emily Cappiello writes:¹²

No matter how many people are involved—maybe you have six kids, maybe it's just you and your spouse—you deserve to be happy.

She continues:

Your children know you're not happy and may act out. Your parents know you're not happy. Your friends know you're not happy. And if you've exhausted all options, it's time to part ways—hopefully amicably.

But throughout her article there is no concern about children and their being equally deserving of happiness, perhaps desperate to share their home with both parents. There is more in similar vein:

I understand that there are lots of consequences with a divorce, too. You may lose friends. You may have to sell the house you made a home. A percentage of your pensions—the money you worked so hard for—may be lost to an ex-spouse. These are all hard pills to swallow.

There is not as much as a word here of concern about the consequences for children. Much talk and discussion about marriage and divorce seems only to concern the people directly involved, the adults.

About two years ago something of the disconnexion between some parents and their progeny was revealed in the report of the trial of an 18 year-old who had plagued his community with crimes including theft, vandalism and drug offences, which he bragged about by posting pictures on social media:

The young man was sentenced yesterday to four years in a young offender institution after being filmed running over a police officer in a stolen car. The defendant, who was on bail at the time over another incident with a different stolen car, has a history of joyriding, which he flaunted online. He committed his first offence aged 11 and went on to rack up 47 convictions for 77 crimes.

In mitigation it was said:

This is somebody who has had one of the worst starts in life. He has been in care for many years. This young man's record is appalling but he just hasn't grown up yet emotionally.

We know that those responsible for this *worst start* will no longer be troubled by this teenager for whom they were responsible initially. Had he been a dangerous dog they had allowed out onto the streets they could have faced a prison sentence. The fate of a human child does not seem to matter and it would appear that neither parent was present in court.¹³

Discussion of “single parenting” seems always to be characterized by the self-concern of the adults involved. The term serves, conveniently I suspect, to obscure the truth that a man and a woman alone together are uniquely responsible for the arrival of any child in this world. There may be lone

¹² E. Cappiello, The Sad Truth—Sometimes Divorce Is the Best Option. *Popsugar* (January 2019) <https://www.grouppninemedia.com/brands/popsugar>

¹³ Gurpreet Narwan, End of the road for baby-faced criminal who ran over a police officer. *The Times* (1 November 2018).

parents but there are no such things as single parents. Melanie Phillips of *The Times* blogged:¹⁴

Single mothers are now a commonplace. To question this phenomenon is to stand accused of ‘demonizing’ vulnerable women. The term ‘single-parent family’ by definition excludes the second parent from the institution, while at the same time sanitizing the loss. Children have two parents, and the family that unfortunately has only one is therefore ‘broken’ or ‘fatherless’ (since the children are usually brought up by the mother). The term ‘single parent family’ implies that there has been no loss, but that this is a type of family complete in itself. It therefore normalizes what is abnormal.

Single parenthood redefines the family as a unit without a man.¹⁵

The two people responsible for the existence of another human being decide that their child will be deprived of its father. The mother will not be obliged to select as a father a man good enough to be a father and the father colludes in this and knows that no further calls will be made on him regardless of the subsequent needs or wants of his child.

In 1979 I explained to a class of fifteen 15 year-olds in Barking that there were reports from southern California where so many babies were being born that had been conceived by artificial insemination that there was concern about the degree of inbreeding in the human population. Women there were choosing to be inseminated with sperm from a very narrow selection of donors: tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed and with IQs above 140. When I asked my pupils how they would react upon being told that the partner they had found at a disco, whom they really, really fancied, was a half-sibling they were all nauseated by the prospect. I could see how horrified they were at the prospect of adults bringing them into a world where they could not acknowledge the incest taboo and where, for their own purposes, parents would frustrate the natural desires of children for an ordinary or “normal” family.

Like with the pedigree Landrace pigs that I once bred by means of artificial insemination, most human sperm donors are required only for their biological contribution to a child’s life, the means of triggering the production of a child with whom there will be no further human or social engagement, no further opportunity to help with the challenges of life and leaving only one adult who can be expected to care for and nurture that child for twenty years or so. Artificial insemination has enabled great improvements in animal populations, in the Arab horse two thousand years ago, and more recently in the productivity of dairy cattle, but this has happened without the need to address what it is to improve human beings and give heed to what it is that lifts us out of the animal kingdom.

With artificial insemination, surrogacy can also be used to assist in the creation of a baby, whereby same-sex couples can become “parents”, one of them at least an adoptive parent without biological links to the child. Here there may be further questions to be asked, not least concerning the view taken by a surrogate mother or a sperm donor about the prospects for the child for whose existence they share a responsibility. Doug Allen and Joseph Price recently looked at the stability rates of same-sex couples:¹⁶

¹⁴ M. Phillips, Tearing up the sexual contract. (5 September 2019) <https://www.melaniephillips.com/>

¹⁵ Artificial insemination can also dehumanize human beings and their relationships but one woman at least disagrees: S. Money-Coutts, Lockdown has made me broody – now I’m searching for a sperm donor online. *The Times* (28 April 2020).

¹⁶ D. Allen and J. Price, Stability rates of same-sex couples: with and without children. *Marriage & Family Review* 56 (July 2020) 51–71.

Confirming the earliest work, we find that same-sex couples are more likely to break up than different-sex couples. We find that the gap in stability is larger for couples with children, the very group for which concerns about stability are the most important.

Family relationships in which transgender people are involved as parents have also been under scrutiny for some time. In a review that examines what is known about transgender parenting the authors write:¹⁷

Key themes reported are: how trans people negotiate their relationships with children following disclosure and transition; the impact of parental transition on children; relationships with wider families; trans people's desires to be parents; and the role of professional practice to support trans families.

For these parents too, there are the same questions as there now are for biological parents, questions from the child's point of view about the consideration given to their interests before they are brought into being.

A few years ago I discovered the website of a prostitute in Clacton-on-Sea (a town in Essex, England). One item on her list of charges involved the hire of a hotel room. She explained that she had teenage children at home and it would not be appropriate to entertain clients there. It took a while for me to digest this for it was not clear whether, despite her involvement in an occupation that would condemn her in many people's eyes, she was concerned for the welfare of her children, or whether her concern was to protect her trade from intrusion by her children.

4. Consequences

What then when society's expectations of parents are disregarded? How should we react when children are presented at school for the first time, children who should be able to dress themselves and use a toilet independently but are unable to do so? How might we respond to children whose parents fail to teach them these skills and fail to prepare them to appreciate, respect and operate in accordance with civic or social values that are essential for the functioning of a rational, secure, happy and enduring community? Put another way, what might we do with people who, like most of us, expect support from the community but whose own values, attitudes and practices undermine that community? What is there that we can do?

Once a woman becomes pregnant, parenthood is not easily escaped. The ease with which a man can attempt to avoid commitment and responsibility means that he has to be more than just a man if he is to be any good as a father.

There are now over 78,000 children in care in England, a rise of 28% in a decade.¹⁸ A similar number of German children are in care, but as part of a larger population.¹⁹ Nearly three million children in the UK live in one-parent families²⁰ out of a total reported as approximately

¹⁷ T. Hafford-Letchfield et al., What do we know about transgender parenting? Findings from a systematic review. *Health Social Care Community* 27 (2019) 1111–1125.

¹⁸ S. Marsh, Councils under huge pressure as number of children in care soars. *The Guardian* (8 January 2020).

¹⁹ Figures from Destatis, the German national statistics agency, show that in a population of 83 million, 77,645 children and young people were in State care in 2015–6.

²⁰ D. Clark, Population of the UK 2019, by age group. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/>

fifteen million.²¹ Hence, about a fifth of children are raised in one-parent households where step-parents or new partners may be foisted on children without any of the scrutiny to which prospective foster and adoptive parents are subject and without the formal commitment undertaken by such parents. Children in care, for whom a secure attachment to a parent is not possible, represent one in two hundred children, about 0.5%.

Unborn children cannot speak up for themselves and their prospects are very much dependent on their having parents who care for one another in order to care for them. When parents fail in this respect before the child is even born, then should the child be left with either of them? These parents would never be allowed to foster or adopt other people's children;²² shouldn't we then ask why it is that they expect to inflict themselves on a child of their own making?

5. Analysis

It is when a child is conceived that two people become linked in a responsibility, people between whom there may already exist a marriage, a contract, an understanding, or nothing. The start of a pregnancy may cause the parents to regard one another as partners. In other circumstances, the woman may choose to inform her partner that such a partnership exists, or may be unable to, and the man may choose to ignore the partnership even when it is brought to his attention. Whatever happens, there is a partnership and it is from this point on that the discussion of marriage or a contract involves the interests of a vulnerable third party.

A marriage is a contract between two people who may then become three or more people. To what extent are any newcomers party to the original contract? Although they cannot commit themselves to the contract they surely have an interest in the acceptance by the two original parties of the expectations implied or made explicit in that contract. Certainly they are much influenced by the success or otherwise of the contract, and far more so than the originating parties. When a partnership involving children goes wrong, consideration is given to the offspring, but is this enough? May it then be too late?

As well as setting out the terms of the contract much earlier, should we not expect more of people who become parents? Just as low expectations of children in school lead to lowered attainment, are low expectations of parents not equally harmful? Should we wait until those who bring children into the world fail those children before we set out very clearly the least that is expected of them?

Then there are the professional parent substitutes. I had to call once at a residential children's home where a child at the school where I was deputy head was close to being expelled and I needed to see the adult responsible for him, his care officer. The gentleman was "on leave". The boy knew only too well that he was in serious trouble; he too needed to see his care officer. He was going to spend all weekend wondering what was going to happen to him—apart from anything else, school was the one place where he could meet siblings who had been put out to a foster home. Were he expelled one of the few remaining links with his family would be broken. I was horrified: I have never been given "leave" from being a parent. Children

²¹ Office for National Statistics (2017) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017>

²² A stable relationship between the adults who wish to adopt seems nowadays to be considered evinced by two years of cohabitation.

cannot be expected to match their calls on adults to a schedule of appointments. When they are in trouble or are afraid they need a parent. When they have questions, they need answers and reassurances. Have we forgotten that this is what children are like?

We expect so much of children. There's school and all that testing for a start and then they have to cope with adults and possibly self-concerned adult squabbling. Then there's puberty and adolescence, and questions about identity, friendship and self-worth. And all the time parts of the adult world, the world of advertising, will not leave them alone—*Unless you buy this you will not be "cool," your friends will not rate you*—and so forth.

What do we expect of parents? I'm not sure.

Becoming a parent, rather like acquiring an animal, a pet, is regarded as a natural right. We regard with understandable unease any suggestion that human reproduction should be licensed and shudder when we look back at the eugenic practices of the Nazis in Germany, and of the Nationalist Party in apartheid South Africa.²³ But where is this unease when we are confronted, if not by the realities in our streets, but in the courts and in schools and children's homes, by accounts such as Richard Morrison's in which he points out that a quarter of all children in UK stepfamilies will run away before reaching sixteen and that, in all, 100,000 children run away from home or care each year. He describes three traumatic scenarios involved:²⁴

First, two parents on the brink of divorce, squabbling frightfully every night; then one parent struggling to raise a family; then a stepfamily incorporating a new adult whose hostile conduct intimidates the child.

It takes a matter of a few minutes and very little space to bring a child into being, as the former Wimbledon champion Boris Becker demonstrated in a broom cupboard in 1999, but then it takes someone else some twenty years to finish the job.

Whenever a crisis is identified amongst young people, government ministers make further demands of schools where children spend only a quarter of their waking hours. Teenage pregnancies, smoking, obesity, the failure to win prestigious international sporting competitions, the inability to do mental arithmetic, the inability to spell, the failure to display civic virtue and now fear of their being recruited into criminal gangs are all problems that schools are expected to address. These crises have, in the last few years, all provoked the same knee-jerk response from politicians who dare not and will not make demands on those who bring children into the world, those who are the first cause.

There are primary concepts connected with families: two parents, one male and the other female, a mother and a father, a reflexion of our biological origins. The terms are distinctive and absolute, requiring modification if used other than for our biological parents, the two people from whose pooled genetic material we came into existence. Mother and father are primary concepts that can nevertheless be drastically changed by qualification; consider the connotations of foster-father and stepmother.

Why is this important? Because the notion of family is so crucially important in our society, where it has developed over centuries and where we lament the breakdown of this

²³ And indeed in the UK. E.g., H. Cox, Multiplication of unfit. Methods of prevention. *Daily Telegraph* (23 February 1921).

²⁴ R. Morrison, Runaways have all been failed, betrayed, abused or neglected by adults. *The Times* (1 November 2000).

structure, not only for the suffering of those directly involved in a broken family, but also for those who have to pick up the pieces, human and material.

6. Some further observations

1. No one, other than the parents, can be obliged to undertake responsibility for a child at any time. Others such as social workers and police officers can leave them as soon as they can be left in the care of another official or institution, in a hospital or a children's home, for example.
2. A strange notion of commitment to a child seems now to be emerging, one that is conditioned by separate homes and convenient times and arrangements that suit adults.
3. There seems to be a reluctance to expect a parent to put the child and the other parent first and to support the other parent in caring for the child.
4. The question, "Why have children?" seems never to be asked or answered from the point of view of the children concerned, life's voiceless and vulnerable conscripts.

A headmaster, Sir Alan Steer of Seven Kings High, has pointed out:²⁵

You can pass moral judgments on families, but the reality is that they are in that situation. Our job as schools is to educate children. We're places of learning or nothing. But sometimes we have to help bring up children as well. We need to give them tough, intelligent love.

We do need to pass judgments on families, especially if we are to help in the way that Sir Alan and many others teachers want to. However, when the business of trying to stand in for ineffective parents conflicts with the education of children whose parents have prepared them for school the latter will make clear their judgments of the former and may withdraw their children. How can we expect to provide equally effective education for children whose parents have failed to prepare them for school, unless we expect more of those parents?

The family, a very complex but crucial institution, is in need of a prop for there is no sign of a suitable substitute for the raising of children and we know that broken and ineffective families lead to economic and social failure. We know that children taken into care are likely to join this group. In 2012 it was pointed out that it then cost between £200,000 and £300,000 a year for residential care for a child, and £30,000 to £60,000 for foster care. It also cost £30,000 to keep someone in a low-security prison for year, and £30,000 to send someone to Eton.²⁶ What it costs these children and young adults in misery and wretchedness is unknowable and we can only guess at what they go through by way of a life. Once conceived and brought into the world these lives are unstoppable and gather a momentum that we ignore at our peril and to their further harm.

Creating a child involves creating dependence on the part of someone who is simply the outcome of the process. Initially, the parents are fully and solely responsible for the child's arrival in the world and only as the child can and does take responsibility for itself and comes of age should their responsibility be reduced. We cannot suddenly impose adult responsibility on the shoulders of adolescents but, with the help of the law perhaps, we could expect that in early

²⁵ Sir Alan Steer (interview). *Evening Standard* (11 July 2008).

²⁶ Z. Williams, Who profits from being in care? It's not the children. *The Guardian* (31 October 2012).

life children will be taught that they are expected to behave and keep their parents out of trouble, in a sliding transfer of responsibility.

Others such as teachers and family members may help to share that responsibility but it remains essentially with the parents. Others may walk away. It is a responsibility from which parents cannot expect to release themselves, for no one else can be obliged to take on the role of parent to the child. We find an easy and natural sympathy for a child who loses a parent in an accident or some other tragedy, but seem less troubled when a parent abandons a child who knows or will learn that it has been abandoned. Unfortunately some parents simply leave others to take responsibility for their children, a form of human fly-tipping.

If we treat our child as simply another item for which we may choose to care, like a pet, then we have abdicated our responsibility and with it, surely, our right to the child, a right that must surely be conditional on our acceptance of the child's rights and interests, which may conflict with ours, and which develop as the child grows. A child is person in his or her own right and can make claims against other persons including his or her parents. Where necessary, others, the wider community, could and should perhaps make these claims on behalf of the child.

From birth onwards there is a third party to consider who will make demands on the other two partners in the relationship. Failures before the birth, such as when a woman is left without financial support, affect only the two adults involved, at least initially, and before the birth a decision that the child should not remain with its natural parents will not involve additional trauma or stress for that child if it is to be taken into care, fostered or adopted as a new-born. For it is only after the birth that the harm and damage that is the lot of some children can accumulate and lead to the cases of harm about which we hear too often: forms of abuse and neglect. Then it is too late, for the child has been harmed, but to remove it then from the home to which has become accustomed may cause further difficulty and distress. Hence we are faced with the difficulty of helping the children of ineffective parents when harm has already been done. Prevention is usually better than cure, but the dynamics of family life and children growing up mean that intervention in anticipation of harm is difficult to justify. How then might we develop forms of prevention to reduce the likelihood of harm to children?

7. Solutions

7.1 Prevention

The aim should surely be to ensure that anyone involved in activity that might result in the arrival of a child in this world considers the matter, not in terms of its consequences for themselves and their partner, but first in terms of the consequences for any child that might result. *They might ask themselves:*

1. Are we in a position to provide together for a child?
2. Does either of us have existing responsibilities for a child or a partner?
3. What do I know about this prospective partner in parenthood?
4. If a child arrives are we prepared to commit ourselves to working together for twenty years for the sake of this child?

When a child is born, for the sake of that child, how reasonable might it be to ask:

1. Are the parents still able to cooperate with one another and support one another as well as the child, and determined to continue doing so?

2. Has either parent ever abandoned, neglected or abused children or a partner?
3. Does either parent have serious criminal convictions or addictions?
4. Would these parents be allowed to adopt or foster a child?

Should we phase in, gradually, clear expectations of parents:

1. You may be called to account for, and be expected to involve yourself in the life of any child of yours, at any time, while it remains a minor, unless a court has directed otherwise;
2. If your child causes harm, damage or injury you will be held jointly responsible with the other parent and, where appropriate, with the child;
3. A second partner in parenthood will have no claim on you until all the requirements of a first partner and their children have been met;
4. During its minority, any child of yours may take up residence with you at any time of their choosing and may insist that you accompany it on occasions such as court appearances, medical appointments or school functions, unless a court has directed otherwise;
5. Should a child of yours have to appear in court, you will appear alongside the child so that you may answer for your stewardship of the child and may be expected to undertake to support the child and the other parent, to prevent further trouble on the part of the child, to compensate victims, to rehabilitate your offspring and to reimburse the wider community for its intervention with your child?

7.2 Imposed marriage

When a first child is born could we then impose on unmarried parents a marriage contract that incorporated these expectations, to formalize a relationship that has a responsibility for vulnerable others, to make clear that this responsibility exists? Would we allow the child to stay with parents who would not in this way acknowledge the child's first claims on them?

Once children are harmed there are no easy ways to help them. The amelioration of a situation would remain our best hope and there exists a range of agencies, statutory and voluntary, that can be brought into play with the interests of the children as a clear, first priority. However this is clearly second-best and prevention is therefore all the more important.

To those who object to the cost of helping people to meet the weighty responsibilities of parenthood I would ask them about the cost of attempting to provide for children who have been betrayed by those who have brought them into the world. I would ask them about the long-term cost of young people who can make little or no contribution to the civic or economic life of the world into which their parents have chosen, yes chosen—by choice of activity, we are none of us innocents any more, chosen to bring them. Lastly, I would ask about the effect on us adults. What do we do to ourselves when we connive at the betrayal of children? What does it say about us if we cannot change all this?

These are the standards that most parents impose upon themselves. If they did not how could there be a society, a community? Why then should all parents not be required to meet reasonable expectations, imposed on behalf of their children?