CULTURE OF AMERICAN FAMILIES

Executive Report

Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture

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Carl Desportes Bowman
James Davison Hunter
Jeffrey S. Dill
Megan Juelfs-Swanson

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INSTITUTE for ADVANCED STUDIES in CULTURE

Culture of American Families: Executive Report

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To obtain additional copies of this report, contact:
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture
P.O. Box 400816
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4816
(434) 924-7705
www.iasc-culture.org
iasc@virginia.edu

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ABOUT THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN FAMILIES PROJECT

The *Culture of American Families Project* is a three-year investigation into the family cultures that are impacting the next generation of American adults. Designed and conducted by the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, this project adapts the tools of contemporary social science to an investigation that is broadly interpretive and contextual. Our goal is to distinguish the cultural frameworks and diverse moral narratives that both inform and are informed by American family life. Specifically, this involves telling the complex story of parents' habits, dispositions, hopes, fears, assumptions, and expectations for their children.

The data for this project was collected in two stages:

1. A web-based survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,000 parents of school-aged children. This one-hour survey, fielded by Knowledge Networks, examines a broad range of parental priorities, aspirations, challenges, and practices, as well as a variety of other cultural and socio-demographic indicators. Data for the survey, and an accompanying non-response follow-up survey, were collected from September 2011 through January 2012.

2. Follow-up, in-person interviews were conducted with 101 of the survey respondents. These 90-minute, semi-structured interviews complement the survey with open-ended questions designed to explore how respondents articulate their visions of the good parent and the good child. Interview questions explore the kinds of people that parents want their children to become and attempt to elicit the explicit and implicit strategies parents employ in their habits and practices of scheduling, disciplining, motivating, and communicating with their children.

Principal findings from the survey and interviews are being released in two separate reports—*Culture of American Families: A National Survey* and *Culture of American Families: Interview Report*—along with *Culture of American Families: Executive Report* that includes thoughts for practitioners working with American families. For more information, or to access other reports, please visit the project website: iasc-culture.org/caf.

Research Team

Carl Desportes Bowman, PhD
Project Director

James Davison Hunter, PhD
Project Director

Jeffrey S. Dill, PhD
Director of Interviews

Ashley Rogers Berner, DPhil
Director of Public Engagement

Joseph E. Davis, PhD
Project Consultant

Tony Tian-Ren Lin, PhD
Research Fellow

Megan Juelfs-Swanson, MA
Research Assistant

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The State of the Family

America's Parents Are Anxious

In the public discussion about the American family, one of the strongest themes for many years has been that the family is an institution in disarray. Hardly anyone disagrees that the family is not functioning as well as it should and, as one scholar declared, "diagnosing its ills has become a cultural industry."[1]

Among the main challenges facing parents is their perception of the child's fragility. Peter Stearn's important history of modern parenting describes the ascendancy of the "vulnerable child" over the twentieth century. There were many reasons for the spread of this idea, but the advice of mid-twentieth century experts like Benjamin Spock went far toward inflaming anxieties rather than easing them.[2] Since then, this anxiety has only increased:

The perception of family decline is part of a larger perception that our communities are less safe, our work ethic has slipped, and American religious and spiritual life has ebbed.

...about the world their children will inherit

- Less than a quarter of today's parents agree that this is a great time to be bringing children into the world and most say it is tougher to raise children today than it was 50 years ago.

Why?

- Among other things, half (49 percent) of parents agree that "in general, Americans lived more moral and ethical lives 50 years ago" than they do today; those who disagree with that assessment are in the minority (only 24 percent).

This view is accompanied by a generally gloomy assessment of the family's trajectory in American society.

- Less than 1 parent in 10 (8 percent) thinks the quality of American family life has improved since they were growing up.

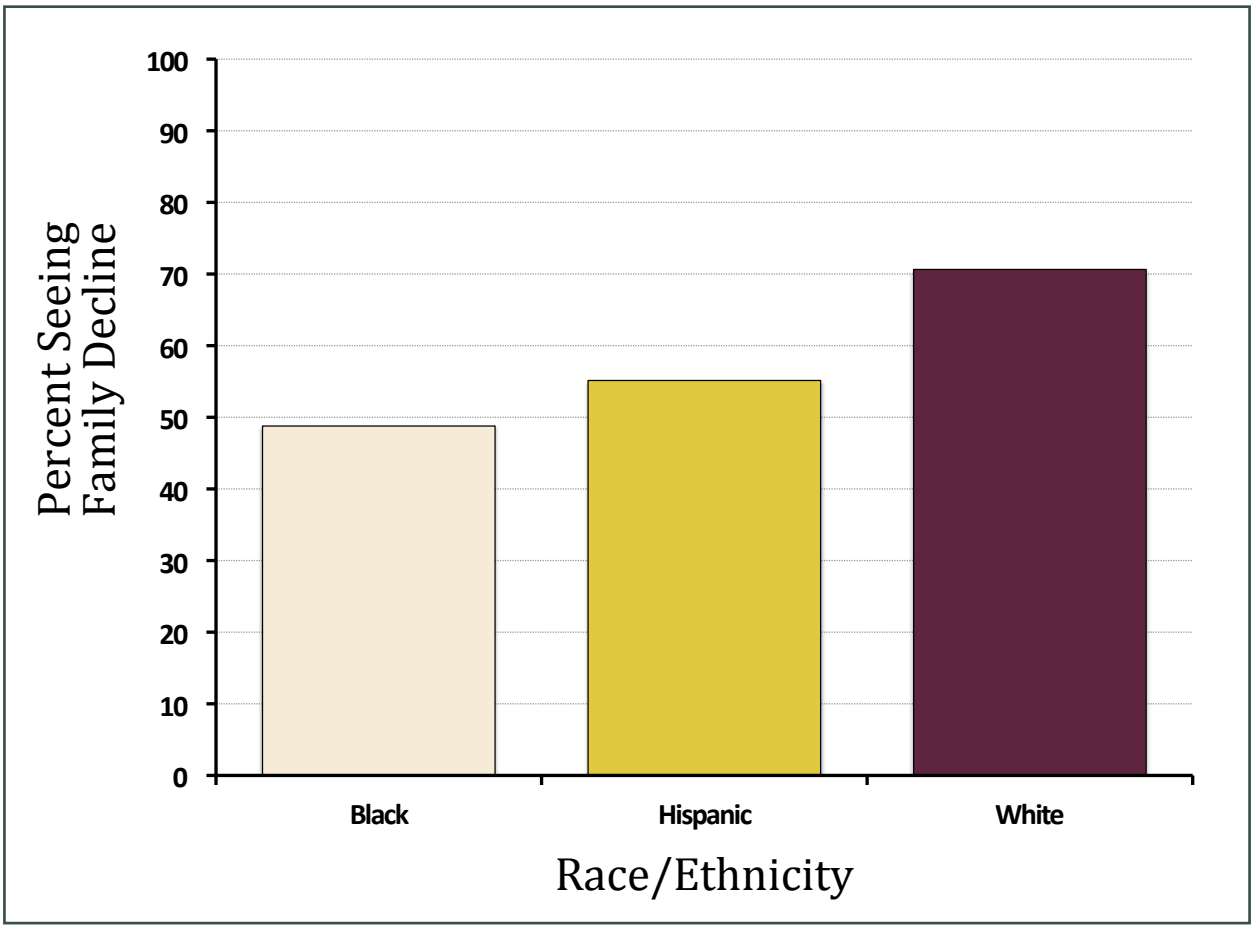
- Exactly 8 times as many (64 percent) say that family life has declined.

What is more, decline in the family is part of a larger view of decline in America: parents who think the family has declined also see a decline in our nation's educational opportunities, the quality of American schools, the safety of American communities, the quality of the popular media, the strength of the American economy, and many other things.

Eighty percent of those who say there has been "strong decline" in the family also perceive a "strong decline" in American moral and ethical standards overall. They believe that the "honesty and integrity of the average American" has waned. The perception of family decline is part of a larger perception that our communities are less safe, our work ethic has slipped, and American religious and spiritual life has ebbed.

Even though the view of family decline is widely shared, it is more pronounced in some social contexts than others. White parents, for example, see greater decline than black parents. Also perceptions of strong decline are highest among the very religious and among Republicans.

FIGURE 1 — Perception That American Family Life Is Declining by Race/Ethnicity.



...about outside influences

One of the major uncertainties of American parenting pertains to outside threats.

- 4 out of 5 parents believe that "children are very vulnerable and must be protected." (Less than 15 percent disagree.)

- Roughly the same number (83 percent) claim, "I invest much effort in protecting my children from negative social influences."

Parents share a sense that the world, at least insofar as children are concerned, is a threatening place. The greatest worries and fears for their children center on injury in an accident, kidnapping or sexual assault, addiction to alcohol and drugs, and lack of ambition to succeed in life.

Concern about other adults has real-world consequences for children's lives too. A black mother of three we interviewed says that her children are outside very little.

> In this crazy world that we live in today, you don't know your neighbors like you used to… [It's] like the whole block, nobody knows each other like they used to and we just feel it's a risk to let them go over to other people's houses. I don't know what those people do in their house.

Women tend to have a sharper sense that their children must be protected than men, and parents who are religiously observant have a keener sense than the non-religious. Political affiliation, however, has little to do with the matter. In fact, parents who self-identify as Democrats are *just as likely* as Republicans to say they invest much effort in protecting their children.

...about new technology

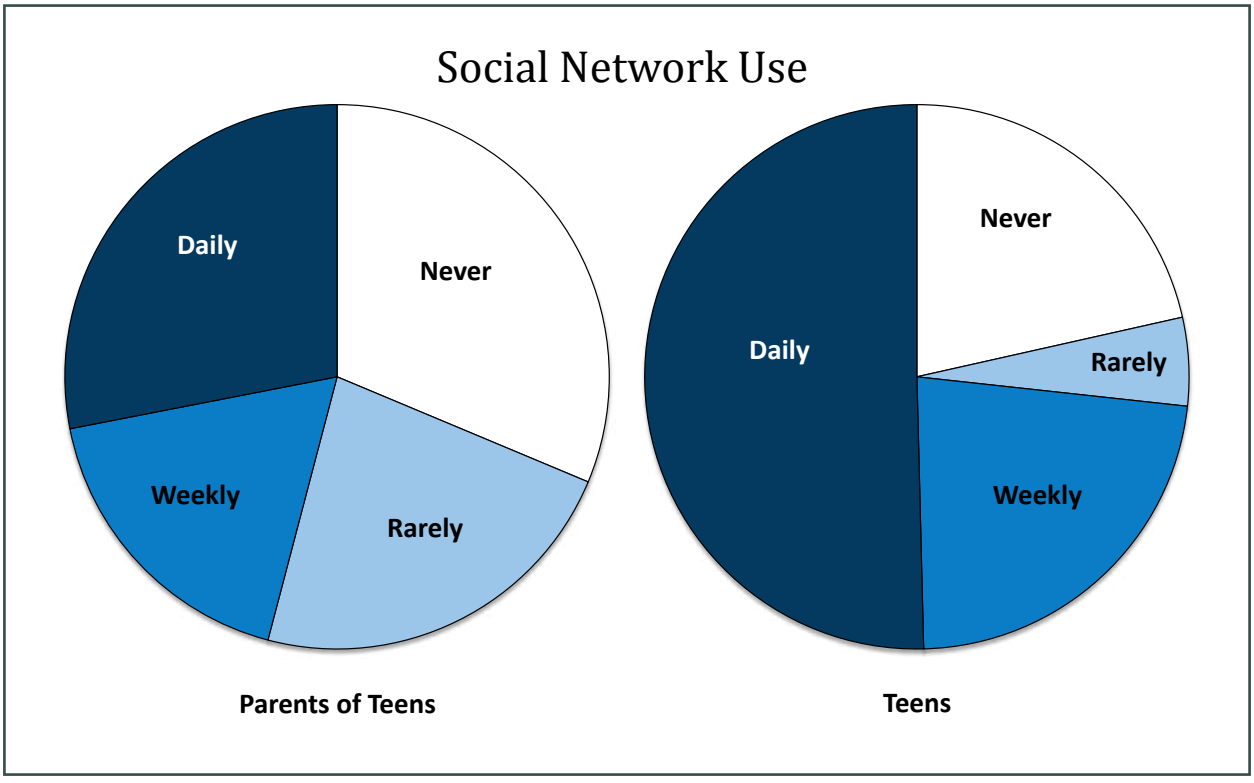
Some of the parents' sense of danger clearly attaches to dimly perceived threats of media and technology. It is true that most American parents see cell phones and the expansion of internet-based social networking like Facebook and Twitter as mostly good for our society, but large swaths see it negatively: 41 percent regard the expansion of internet social networking as mostly negative and 34 percent regard cell phones in the same way.

As far as the *presence* of the new electronic communications technology in the family goes, it is nearly ubiquitous, especially in families with teenagers. According to the *Culture of American Families Survey*,

- 84 percent of teenagers carry a cell phone.
- A full 93 percent of teenagers are connected to their peers via cell phone or social networking online.
- 7 out of 10 of teenagers are texting at least once a day, and nearly as many (64 percent) are texting multiple times daily.
- 4 out of 5 teens have a Twitter, Facebook, or other social networking account where they "follow" and "friend" people whom their parents don't know, much less "friend."
- Two-thirds of teenagers connect to their online social networks at least several times a week.
- 62 percent of all parents of teenagers say that "my children are constantly connected electronically with their friends."

If we add to these the many other types of individuals, information, and organizations that teenagers can access instantaneously on the web, it is clear that their daily lives are infused with contacts and information that are beyond their parents' control.

FIGURE 2 — Web-based Social Network Use of Parents and Teens.



One mother we interviewed described the dilemma this way:

> …the internet is vast, much more—it's like the world at your fingertips, so to speak. Because there's a lot about the world that we don't know, you have to be careful going out into it.

Other parents echoed this sentiment, worrying that when kids are "on YouTube—[they] can see almost anything on there." Parents—cutting across racial and educational lines—fear that their children will be "impressed by certain things" and be "exposed" to "things that will lead them astray."

- Parents are twice as likely to agree as to disagree that "my children see many things in the media that they should not see" (59 percent compared to 29 percent).

- And a large minority of parents (40 percent) say that "trying to control teenagers' access to technology is a losing battle," a sentiment especially held among parents of teenagers.

...even about their own parenting

Though a minority of parents say they have "little clue what it takes to be a really good parent" (9 percent), "feel inadequate as parents" (21 percent), or believe that their children need more from them than they are able to provide (31 percent), it doesn't mean that they are not worried about how they are doing as parents. The majority (55 percent) expressed concern about their effectiveness, admitting that they often wonder whether they are doing a good job at parenting.

It is for this reason that parents pour time and energy into their children.

- 9 out of 10 parents (91 percent)—cutting across racial and ethnic differences—say they invest much effort in shaping the moral character of their children.

- 8 out of 10 parents (83 percent) say they invest much effort in protecting their children from negative social influences.

- And 7 out of 10 parents (72 percent) say they invest much effort in providing opportunities that will give their children a competitive advantage down the road.

Indeed, parents sense that they should be doing more, that their investment in their children should be even greater than it is.

- 6 of every 10 parents say they should be spending more time with their children than they do, twice the number who say their investment of time is enough.

Parents report that their own families and their own children are actually doing extremely well.

Parents Say Their Families Are Doing Well

Given the general sense of crisis about the family among experts and parents alike, it was surprising to learn that parents see their personal efforts paying off. *Parents report that their own families and their own children are actually doing extremely well.*

For example, according to parents, a third of their own children are "A students" on an A to F scale. Another 49 percent are either A/B or B students. This means that fully 82 percent of America's schoolchildren are above average in their academic performance. This may fall short of Garrison Keillor's "children of Lake Wobegon," but not by much.

Beyond that,

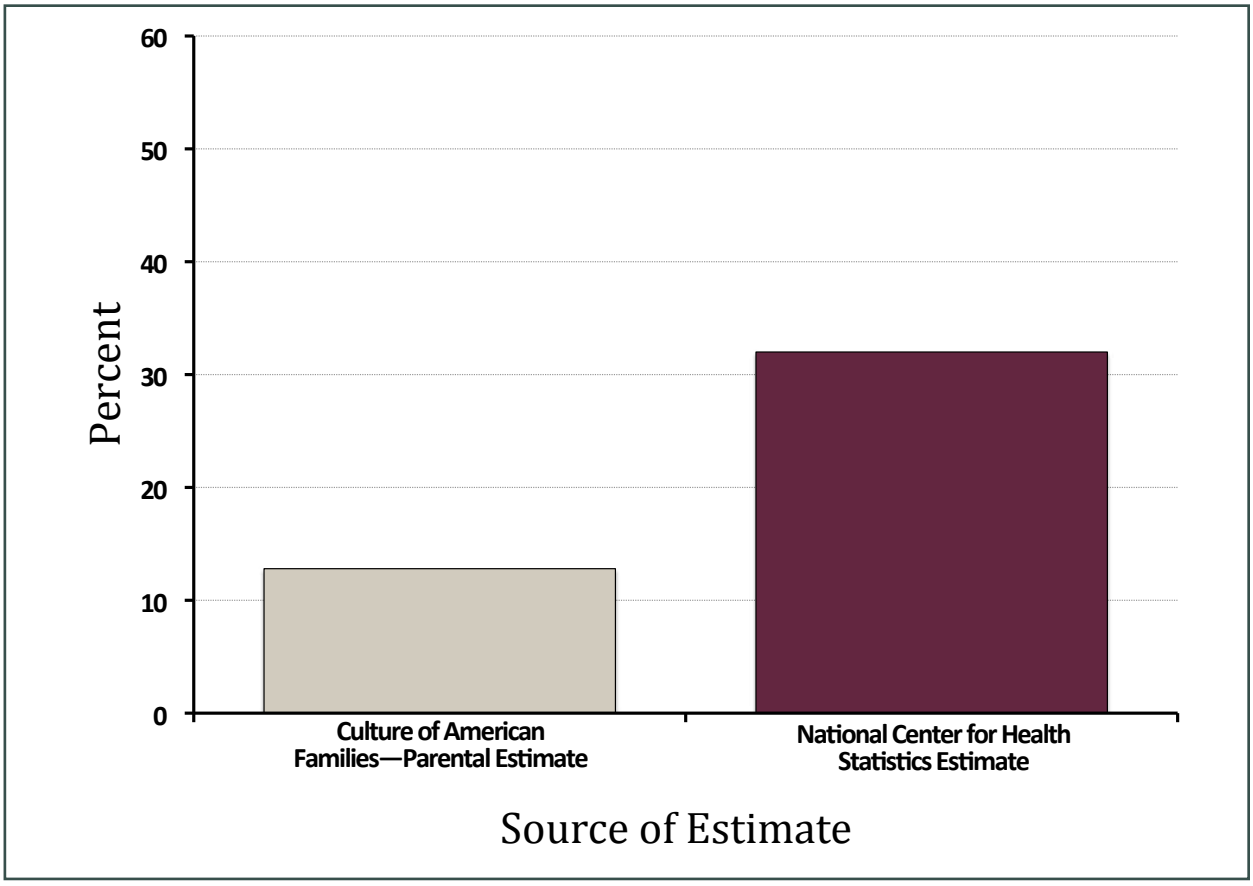
- Parents report that 93 percent of their own children have *never* been suspended from school.

- They also report that, in any given year, two-thirds of America's children receive an award or certificate for outstanding performance in school, sports, music, or the arts.

Perhaps these levels of achievement are due in part to close monitoring and support by their parents:

- 62 percent of parents indicate that they monitor their children's homework almost always, and another 23 percent say they do so at least moderately. Only 15 percent of parents indicate that they rarely or never provide oversight for their children's homework.

FIGURE 3 — Percent of Children Who Are Overweight, Contrasting Estimates.[3]



Similarly, the overwhelming majority of American parents (88 percent) say the values that they labor to instill in their children are at least moderately supported by the schools their children attend.

Are America's Parents in Denial?

Parents in the *Culture of American Families Survey* paint a rosier overall picture of their kids than the experts who study the family do. For example,

- Based upon parental reports, the average grade point average for high school students is between 3.15 and 3.24.

Yet, according to national transcript data, the average high school grade point average is between 2.95 and 3.0.

- Based upon parental reports, only 1 of every 20 American school children consumes alcohol; the rest—19 out of 20—never do. Limiting the analysis to teenagers, parents still report that only 1 in 10 children ever drink alcohol; and limiting it to children 16 and older, the number who occasionally imbibes rises to only 17 percent or less than 1 in 5.

Yet, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 72 percent of all high school students report having tried alcohol and 42 percent of them in the last 30 days.

- Based upon parental reports, only about 17 percent of high school students are sexually active and 60 percent of have "definitely not" experienced sexual intercourse.

Yet, according to the CDC, 42 percent of all high school boys and 43 percent of all high school girls report having sex.

- Based upon parental reports, 71 percent of American parents have no children who are overweight. Parental reports also suggest that only 13 percent of America's children are "somewhat overweight," including only about 3 percent who are "greatly overweight."

Yet, according to National Center for Health Statistics data, more than one-third of American children and adolescents are overweight, with 17 percent of them being obese.[4]

Are American parents in denial about what is really going on in their children's lives? In certain respects, they are.

How Parents Are Making Do

The stresses and strains of family life are real, to be sure. There is a pervasive sense that parents can take little for granted, must always be watchful, and can never, ever do enough. Under the weight of this anxiety, parents naturally make the best of the situation.

...through a "new therapeutic familism"

"Making the best of things" has meant, in part, pursuing the ideals and practices of intense intimacy in the nuclear family. This "new therapeutic familism," which has been documented by many scholars over the past several decades, is distinguished by the way it seeks to satisfy the emotional and psychological needs of the family's members. Evidence suggests that the new familism may be a strategy for parental influence (especially of kids) in a context where there is a general loss of authority in the family.

The evidence from the survey confirms that the new familism pervades family culture in America:

- 96 percent of American parents say they "love spending time" with their children and 95 percent of parents say they spend an hour or more interacting with their children on a typical school day.

- 94 percent say their parenting experience has been a happy one.

- 83 percent of all parents say their children treat them with "a great deal of respect"; only 1 parent in 10 disagrees with this statement.

- 52 percent say their children see them as friends; an additional 28 percent say a blending of friend and authority figure.

What becomes clear, though, is that children's "thinking for themselves" actually means children should think like their parents and less like their peers.

One white father in his mid-thirties was like many others when he spoke of the importance and need to communicate:

…[C]ommunication is important, that's what everybody stresses. That's what Oprah, the psychologists, and everyone else says, "communication is important."

Parental feelings of family closeness extend to shared values and beliefs:

- More than 90 percent say their children share their own understandings of right and wrong.

- Two-thirds say their children share their views of faith and religion; only nine percent disagree with this statement.

In our interviews, this desire to share the same values and beliefs is expressed as the parents' wish that their children will "think for themselves." What becomes clear, though, is that children's "thinking for themselves" actually means children should think like their parents and less like their peers. What appears to be the encouragement toward autonomy is more of an encouragement toward family conformity, rather than conformity with peers.

Given the reported harmony with their children, it is not surprising that parents also report very low levels of parent-child conflict.

- Only 7 percent say they experience high levels of conflict with their children; 42 percent describe themselves as having a moderate level of conflict; and 52 percent claim a low level of conflict.

When we probe further, asking specifically about the levels of disagreement in 16 potential trouble areas, parents typically report conflicts at a level of 0 or 1 on a 0–10 scale. As a rule, when parents and children argue, they do so mainly over the ordinary routines of daily living—children's messiness, picking up after themselves, fulfilling daily chores or obligations, and sibling disagreements.

Looking toward the future,

- 7 out of every 10 parents (72 percent) say, "I hope to be best friends with my children when they are grown."
- Two-thirds of American parents (67 percent) say they would "willingly support a 25 year old child financially if they really needed it"; only 17 percent give a clear indication that they would not.
- Fully two-thirds (65 percent) say they would "encourage a 25 year old child to move back home if they had difficulty affording housing"; again, only 17 percent explicitly reject the idea.

...independently, but with support when they need it

Making the best of the challenge of parenting raises questions about the level of social support that exists around the family. In the past, family life never took place in a social vacuum. Parents were surrounded by a network of social ties comprising extended family, friends, and neighbors, not to mention a range of social institutions. Yet a large percentage of American parents now say they manage fairly independently, though they are creative and adaptive when they need to be.

The *Culture of American Families Survey* found that:

Yet a large percentage of American parents now say they manage fairly independently, though they are creative and adaptive when they need to be.

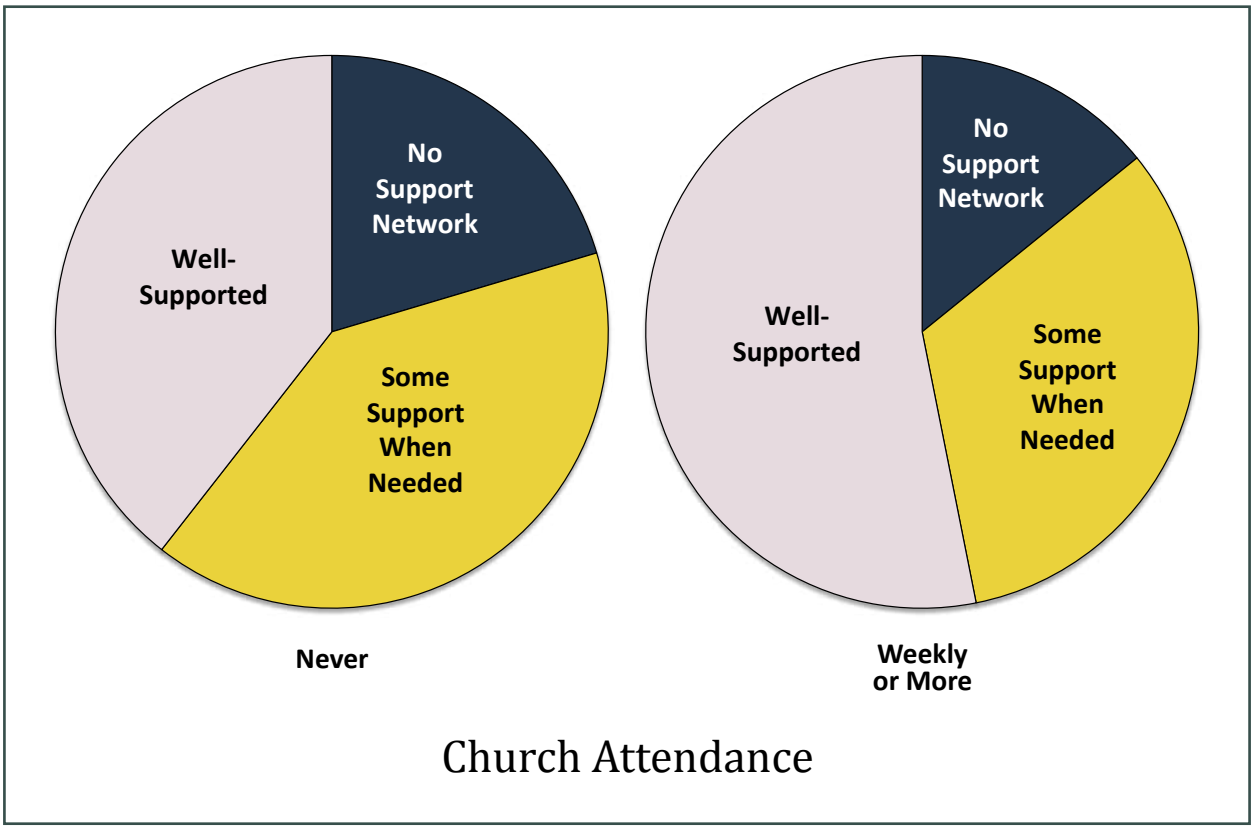
- Just under half (46 percent) are very well or fairly well supported by a network of friends and family.
- Just over a third (37 percent) say they are fairly independent with a little support when necessary.
- And 1 in 6 (17 percent) say they are very independent with no real support network. These are disproportionately represented among the less well educated and the poor.

But when parents speak of support, what do they mean?

The survey confirms our intuitions that there is a general hierarchy of social support:

- ***Spouse or partner:*** 79 percent of parents say they receive at least moderate support from their spouse or partner.
- ***Extended family:*** 56 percent say they receive at least moderate support from extended family: grandparents, aunts, and uncles; if one includes one of their older children, the number rises to 70 percent.
- ***Friendship networks:*** 36 percent claim that they receive this level of support from friends.
- ***Religious community:*** 27 percent receive at least moderate support from their church or synagogue, though if they attend services weekly or more, the number increases to 51 percent.
- ***After-school programs:*** Just about a quarter (23 percent) say that after-school programs offer moderate (or greater) support, though almost 40 percent of parents with family incomes of less than $25,000 a year say they provide this level of support.
- ***Neighbors:*** Less than 1 in 5 (18 percent) say they receive at least moderate support from their neighbors.
- ***Social Services:*** Only 13 percent say they receive at least moderate support from government social services, but if their income is less than $25,000, then the number increases to 29 percent.

FIGURE 4 — Level of Support by Church Attendance.



- *Live-in nanny or childcare provider:* Only 1 parent in 20 says that babysitters and nannies provide at least a moderate level of support.

In general, American parents are creative and adaptive in getting the support that they need. Most worrisome are the 1 in 6 who receive no support at all; the largest number are divorced or single, poor, and with little education.

As a rule, though, parents "go it alone." Whether by choice or constraint, they parent with very thin support networks—namely, their partner and a few members of their extended family. What is striking is how small an active role neighbors play in the functioning of American families. Six out of 10 parents (59 percent) say their neighbors offer no active support at all in their daily childcare routines, and three-quarters of all parents rate their neighbors support as negligible. As for faith communities, after-school programs, and other social services, they seem to operate within niches that affect only certain types of American families. Yet within these constituencies, they are very important. As much as experts might assert that "it takes a village to raise a child," for most American parents, the village is absent.

The consequences? A white mother of two put it this way:

> …I don't think there's a lot of guidance… [you] put the fires out and handle the crises and make the U-turns and deal with crazy schedules and noise all the time, so you have to learn as you go. So I think that's what I'm taking away from the experience. And without guidance it really makes you feel that you're driving with a blindfold sometimes.

...with medication as a last resort

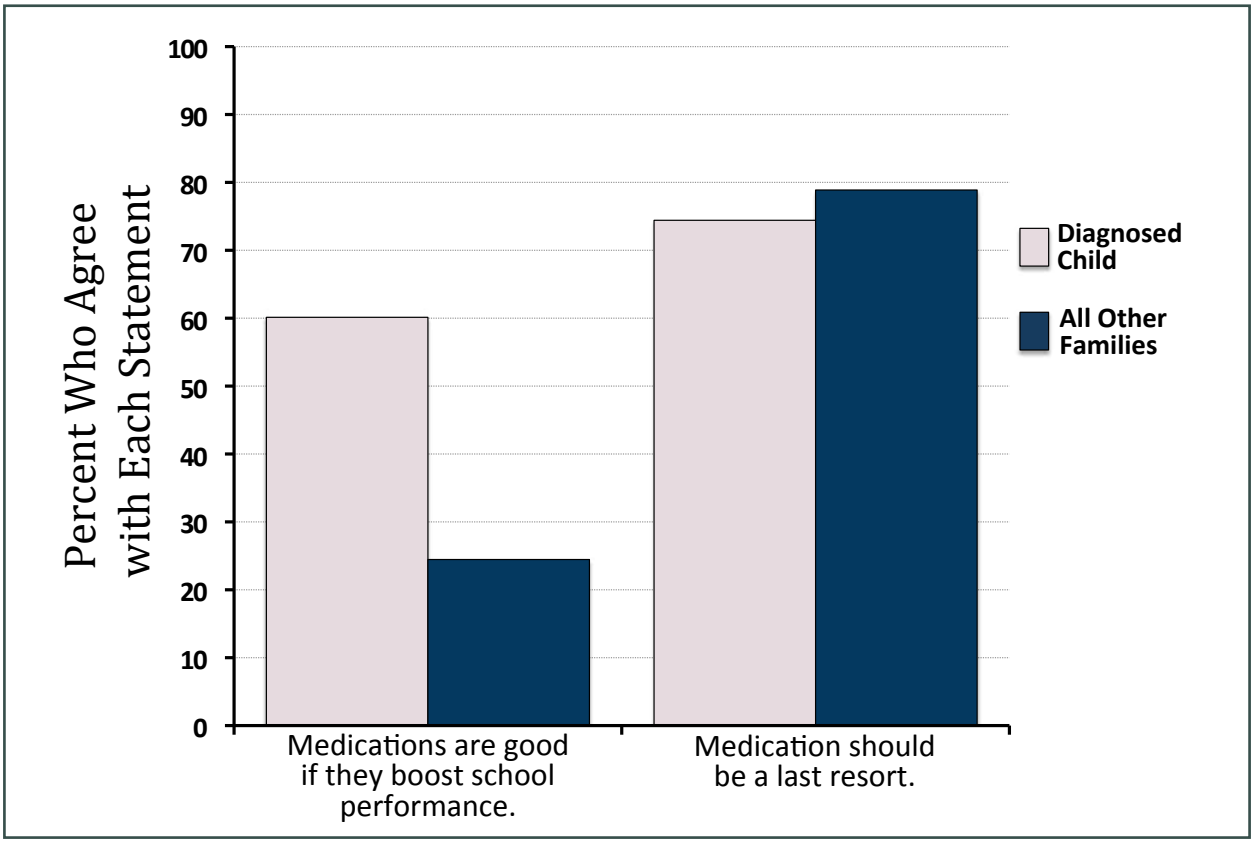
- 4 in 10 parents (41 percent), for example, say that one of their children has struggled with excessive difficulties of focus, attention, and distractibility.
- 1 in 4 (24 percent) say one of their children has struggled with depression or excessive anxiety.
- Nearly 3 in 10 (29 percent) say that at least one of their children is overweight.
- Combining these worries, we find that a majority of American parents (60 percent) have a child who manifests one of these "challenges."

Yet only a quarter of American parents (24 percent) say that one of their children has actually been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (A.D.D. or A.D.H.D.) or with clinical depression or anxiety, and only 1 parent in 5 has a child who has taken medication for one of these problems.

But this rate is suppressed in part by the fact that the children of younger parents have not yet evidenced a problem meriting diagnosis or medication. When analysis is restricted to parents whose youngest child is a teenager, 30 percent of parents say one of their children has been clinically diagnosed with issues of focus or depression, and one quarter (26 percent) say one of their children has received medication.[5]

Yet parents wonder. Over a quarter (27 percent), for instance, say even if a teacher or guidance counselor recommended that a medication could improve their child's school performance, and a doctor agreed, they still wouldn't consider it. And 4 parents in 10 (41 percent) *dis*agree that "medications to improve focus are a good thing if they boost a child's school performance."

FIGURE 5 — Views of Medication by Family with Diagnosed Child.[6]



Moreover, almost two-thirds of parents (63 percent) believe that many children "are now medicated for problems that are better treated in other ways," and 4 out of 5 parents (78 percent) think "medications should generally be the last resort for solving a child's problems."

And parents equivocate. On several of our agree–disagree questions regarding medication, a quarter to a third are not sure what to think, selecting "undecided" as their response. Parents are most inclined to accept medication solutions when school performance is thrown into the balance. As a rule, they want to help their kids in any way possible, including the use of psychotropic medications if they believe circumstances warrant it.

2

The Moral Ecology of the Family

Central to the culture of any family is its moral life—its view of good and bad, right and wrong, what the family aspires to and what it shuns. These understandings are often implicit and rarely articulated in daily life, but they are powerfully present in the personal habits and attitudes of parents, the expectations they have for their children, the behaviors they encourage, the decisions they make, and the sanctions they mete out. Children, then, are formed morally within this culture—just as they are formed intellectually and emotionally.

To speak of "family culture" is to speak of something different from the popular psychological idea of "parenting style." Parenting style, as described by psychologists, is simply a strategy by which parents raise their children. Think of it as an "approach" that includes the methods and techniques of childrearing. Thus, different parents have different styles of parenting.

Family culture can be thought of as a more comprehensive "moral ecology" within which all members of the family, including children, reside. It includes such things as the bedrock values and ideals that the family holds sacred, the story that the family tells of itself, and the practices that reinforce these things. It is the world children inhabit. In this way, family culture is a more complex and inclusive phenomenon than mere parenting style.

"Moral ecology"... includes such things as the bedrock values and ideals that the family holds sacred, the story that the family tells of itself, and the practices that reinforce these things. It is the world children inhabit.

The Complicated Circumstances of Our Times

What first becomes clear is that parents have diverse, even contradictory, views of what constitutes the ideal family life. Whether the issue is sex before marriage, birth control, living together before marriage, same-sex marriage, the role of the mother, or even eating together as a family, the *Culture of American Families Survey* finds that Americans disagree very fundamentally about family values.

What is more, while most (69 percent) agree that "we would all be better off if we could live by the same basic moral guidelines," large swaths of the population of American parents live by an everyday (as opposed to philosophical) relativism, believing that there are "few moral absolutes," that "all views of what is good are equally valid," and that "as long as we don't hurt others, we should all just live however we want."

At the very least, the absence of a clear consensus of family values and the individualism and relativism that inform parents' views of values suggest that there are no clear roadmaps for parents to follow in raising their kids morally.

Parents Want Their Children to Develop Strong Moral Character

Though they may disagree about the moral frameworks that guide family values, parents do not disagree about the urgency of raising good kids. On this, parents are of one mind.

- The overwhelming majority of American parents (96 percent) say "strong moral character" is very important, if not essential, to their children's future.

Unprompted, parents tend to lack a vocabulary for talking about character and virtue with their children. Yet, during the in-depth interviews, they nevertheless articulate their priorities on this matter. One Hispanic mother of six speaks for many when she says,

> I believe you have to have a good heart first. I wouldn't want all my kids to be the top students and become attorneys and doctors, but be horrible people. I wouldn't want that… you've got to be a good person. You've got to be a good kid.

When prompted, what are the specific qualities that parents most want to see in their children? Figure 6 shows how specific qualities are ranked in each category from high to low, showing a broad and general consensus, with only a few areas of strong disagreement, the most notable being religion.

Four Family Cultures

One way of distilling the variety of factors that make up family culture is a statistical technique called "cluster analysis." In distilling the complex array of factors in the Culture of American Families Project, we conceive of the family as a moral ecosystem in which understandings of "the good" are taught explicitly and imparted implicitly, reverberating through the ordinary practices and conversations of daily family life. As such, our effort to identify "family types" extends beyond questions of emotional attachment and parental direction to include factors pertaining to different understandings of "the good," its sources, and the aspirations that parents hold for their children. On these strictly moral grounds, four types of family cultures emerged, what we are calling the Faithful, the Engaged Progressives, the Detached, and the American Dreamers.

FIGURE 6 — Parental Aspirations for Children, Ordered High to Low.

Most Highly Valued	Moderately Valued	Least Valued
Honest and truthful	Generous with others	Valuing practical skills over book learning
Strong moral character	Smart/intelligent	Interested in arts, literature, & history
Loving	Comfortable sharing feelings	Thin, not overweight
Reliable and dependable	Forgiving when wronged	Popular and well-liked
Hard-working	Volunteer time to help others	Powerful and influential
Preserving close ties with parents & family	Strong religious faith	Athletic
Financially independent	Patriotic	Shared political values
Highly educated	Concerned about recycling & the environment	Famous or well-known

The Faithful—20 Percent of American Parents

An Overview

The defining feature of the Faithful is that "morality" is understood to be received from a divine, external source, whether within a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim tradition. A strong view of providence is the lens that shapes not only the Faithful's perceptions of current realities and the past, but also their hopes for the future, both practically and theologically.

Some of the Faithful's most basic truths are understood to be family truths, especially the reservation of sex and childbearing for the institution of marriage between a man and a woman. These foundational understandings—that truth is received from above, that it is therefore timeless, and that families are not only blessings from above, but enclaves for the reproduction and multiplication of God's timeless truths—mold the cultural practices and understandings of these committed conservatives.

For the Faithful, a strong view of providence is the lens that shapes not only the Faithful's perceptions of current realities and the past, but also their hopes for the future, both practically and theologically.

The moral intuition and imagination of the Faithful parents tend to be conservative. The Faithful are distressed by the moral conditions of the society in which they live, determined to defend the traditional social order, and confident that if they cannot accomplish this task, at least they can buffer themselves from progressive currents enough that their families will remain faithful to their traditions. Indeed, in the face of what they consider to be sweeping social decay, the Faithful sustain a steadfast confidence that their own children will imbibe and perpetuate the truths that have been nurtured, day by day, in their homes and faith fellowships.

The Specifics

Background Profile: Two-thirds of the Faithful are white (non-Hispanic), 16 percent are Hispanic, and 11 percent are black. They are of fairly average education, with slightly more having completed a 4-year college degree (36 percent) than other parents (32 percent). They are most heavily concentrated in the South and least heavily in New England and on the Pacific coast. Republicans outnumber Democrats by a 4-to-1 margin (51 percent compared to 13 percent), and 61 percent say they plan to vote for the Republican candidate in the 2012 presidential election compared to only 12 percent who say they support the re-election of President Obama.

Family Life: Eighty-eight percent of the Faithful are married, and three-quarters (74 percent) remain in their first marriage. Nearly all of the parents in this group (96 percent) say that the trend toward "more people living together without getting married" has been bad for American society, even though 37 percent confess to having lived with a romantic partner outside of marriage. Their family sizes are larger than average—a quarter have four or more children—and their attitude toward public schools (and secular "experts" in general, for that matter) is more negative than for other groups.

The culture of the Faithful is the last bastion of pre-1960s sexual morality. On a 7-point scale running from "completely disagree" to "completely agree," two-thirds of the Faithful (68 percent) take the most extreme stance, completely disagreeing that "sex before marriage is okay if a couple love each other." It is not surprising then that 7 out of every 10 among the Faithful (69 percent) believe that methods of birth control should not be made available to teenagers without their parents' approval; they are nearly 3 times as likely as other parents to express this view. Three-quarters of the Faithful completely disagree that homosexual couples should have the right to marry. Even so, few (19 percent) are worried or fearful that their own children might develop a homosexual orientation, and the vast majority (80 percent) think there is no possibility that their children have ever had sexual intercourse. In a nutshell, while society is seen to suffer various forms of decline, the Faithful are confident that their own families will remain faithful to their God-given sexual morality—so confident, in fact, that they unanimously agree that "my children share my understandings of right and wrong."

The Faithful can also sometimes defy outsiders' perceptions of old-fashioned. It is true that mothers among the Faithful are less likely than other mothers to work for pay outside the home and more likely to embrace the occupational label of "homemaker," especially when their children are young. But gender roles among the Faithful are far from the cut-and-dried "mom should stay at home" while "dad brings home the bacon" variety. Only a minority (43 percent), for instance, agree that "a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works," and only 8 percent—less than 1 in 10—"completely agree." And even though the Faithful are much more likely than other parents to "completely agree" that a woman should put her husband and children ahead of her career, they are equally adamant in their insistence that a man should do the same. In a word, the Faithful embrace a gender equality that allows for gender-based role distinctions. Yet, even in the presence of such distinctions, they insist that men and women should be equally focused upon the family. As a matter of fact, they are less likely than other parents to agree that "the mother's role in raising children is more important than the father's." Many of them (42 percent), in fact, completely disagree with this diminished vision of fatherhood.

Like most American parents, the Faithful want their families to be warm and emotionally supportive places for both themselves and their children, even at the expense of parental happiness. For example, when divorce is pitted against marital unhappiness, marital unhappiness wins out—60 percent of the Faithful disagree that divorce is preferable to maintaining an unhappy marriage compared to only 16 percent of other parents. And the therapeutic view that "the best response in most situations is whatever keeps people from feeling uncomfortable or upset" is rejected by 83 percent of the Faithful, compared to 48 percent of other parents. Similarly, the Faithful are nearly unanimous (91 percent) in rejecting the moral premise that "as long as we don't hurt others, we should all just live however we want." When faced with a situation that is morally unclear, the Faithful overwhelmingly say they would decide what to do based upon what God or scripture tells them is right (88 percent), rather than upon "what is best for everyone involved" (9 percent) or what would "make you happy" (2 percent). Happiness (and the feeling factor in general) matters to the Faithful as it does to others, of course, but it weighs less heavily upon the Faithful than their commitment to moral clarity.

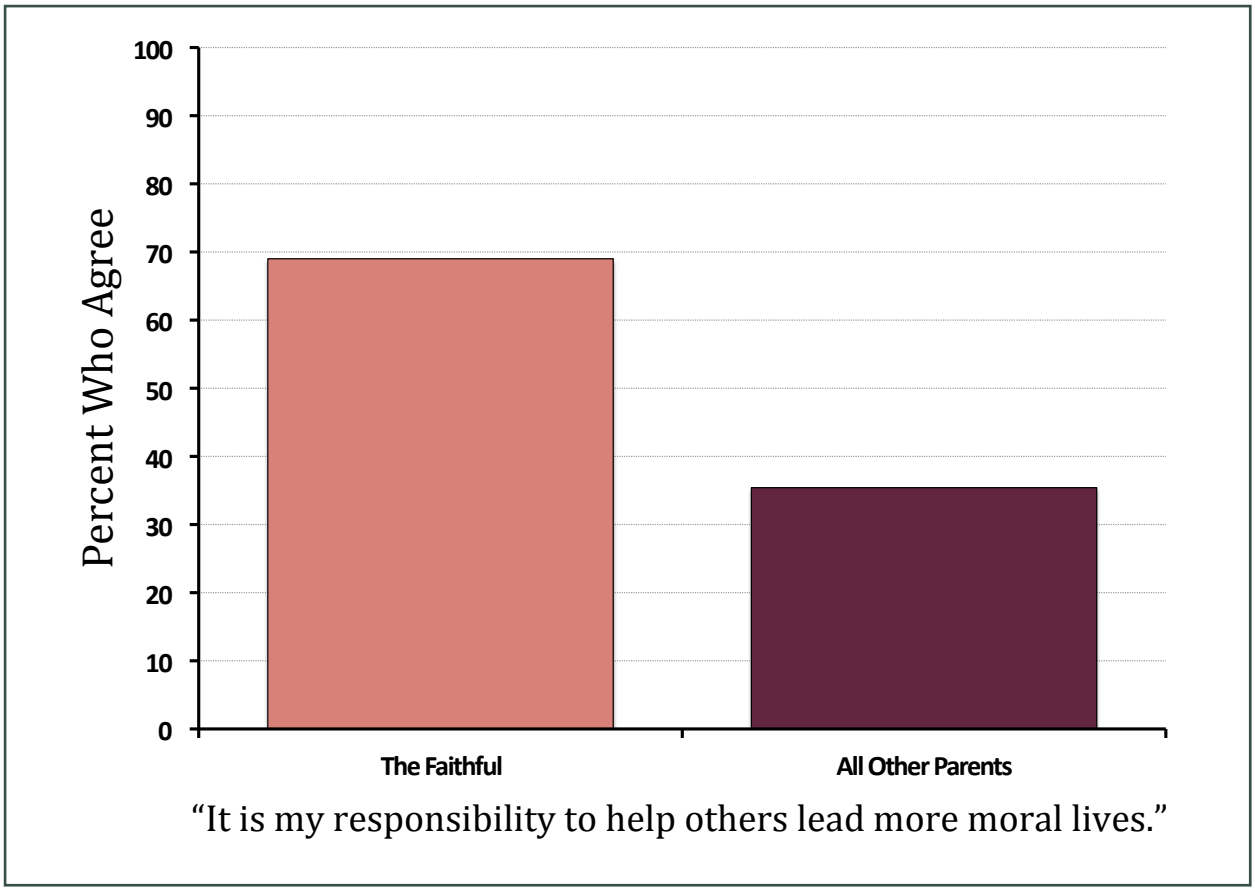
Faith: Half (49 percent) of the Faithful say their religion is "the most important thing in their life" and most of the rest (46 percent) rate their religion as "very important." Nearly all them know without a doubt that God really exists (97 percent) and have a personal relationship with Him (97 percent). More than 4 out of 5 (82 percent) attend religious services on a weekly basis. And three-quarters of the Faithful describe their religious beliefs as "conservative," the same number that identify themselves as "born again."

Rejecting the more relativistic faith stance of many American parents, four-fifths of the Faithful (81 percent) reject the notion that "most religions are equally good paths to the same destination," and only 10 percent say "there are few moral absolutes—what is right or wrong usually varies from situation to situation" (compared to a majority of other parents). Given these positions, it is not surprising that they are the only group among our family cultures to reject the idea that "we should be more tolerant of people who adopt alternate lifestyles"; only a quarter (27 percent) of the Faithful embrace this view (compared to 62 percent of other parents). These understandings all fit within a broader ontological framework in which human nature is seen as "basically sinful" (78 percent agreement) and the moral responsibility of each individual includes helping others to "lead more moral lives" (69 percent agreement). Other parents tend to reject both of these understandings (with only 43 percent and 36 percent agreement, respectively).

Beyond matters of belief, daily interactions between the Faithful and their children are strongly informed by their religious framework.

Faith and Children: Beyond matters of belief, daily interactions between the Faithful and their children are strongly informed by their religious framework. Not only do the Faithful pray (80 percent pray daily), but nearly two-thirds (64 percent) say they pray or

FIGURE 7 — Perception of Moral Responsibility for Others by Family Cultures.



have devotions *with their children* at least several times a week. Most (67 percent) practice a daily ritual of prayer with family meals; only 20 percent of other American parents do the same. The Faithful are also unusual in their habit of talking with their children about faith; nearly four-fifths of them (79 percent) say they do this at least several times a week compared to 30 percent of other parents. All of this is consistent with their understanding that "raising children to reflect God's will and purpose" is the most important goal of parenting. Three-quarters of the Faithful say this is more important than their children's eventual happiness and positive feelings about themselves, whether their children one day make positive contributions to their communities, or whether their children become successful in their careers.

These things might strike some contemporary parents as old-fashioned, but being old-fashioned is not a problem for the Faithful. They see spanking, for example, as a more important parenting tool than other parents; they are more inclined to assign daily chores; and they understand the role of parents as the director of children's development more than caretaker of their discovery gardens. Their sense of efficacy and control in the face of a seductive material world are impressive. Fully two-thirds reject the idea that "trying to control teenagers' access to technology is a losing battle," compared to 41 percent of other parents.

Community: While families, like politicians, may debate whether "it takes a village" to raise a child, all families live and breathe within broader networks of family, friends, organizations, and institutions. The Faithful, in particular, surround themselves with those who support their moral outlook and faith understandings. In situations where other

parents turn to experts, clinicians, or counselors, the Faithful turn to pastors or spiritual counselors. A number of questions in our survey suggest that they are suspicious of social science (and scientific knowledge) in general. This suspicion often extends to experts trained in those disciplines—social workers, psychologists, and educators—until, that is, the Faithful receive some signal of where the experts are coming from, of their faith commitments. When they have serious concerns about a child's moral or ethical development, the Faithful say they turn first to their spouse and then to scripture, religious teachings, pastors, or religious counselors. After that they turn to extended family or friends. Only later do they turn to teachers, school administrators, therapists, psychologists, or counselors. More than 4 out of 5 (83 percent) say the values they teach their children are greatly supported by their children's experience with the faith community. In short, the structure of their hierarchy of trust is different than for many other parents. And the Faithful feel better supported in general by their web of relations than do many others. The fact that their faith community is woven tightly into that support fabric certainly has something to do with it.

The World: One of the reasons that the Faithful surround themselves with coreligionists is that the larger world is perceived to be in decline. About half of the Faithful see a "strong decline" since their own childhood in American moral and ethical standards (49 percent); in the quality of TV, movies, and entertainment (52 percent); and in the dating and sexual practices of teenagers (57 percent). In fact, a sizeable minority of the Faithful (42 percent) say that public schools have a generally negative impact upon the nation's children (compared to only 19 percent of other parents). Even among the Faithful who send their children to local public schools, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) say they would not do so if they had a choice, with religiously affiliated private schools and homeschooling being the preferred alternatives.

Engaged Progressives... must prepare children to be responsible choosers, weighing alternatives, thinking carefully through courses of action in advance.

Engaged Progressives—21 Percent of American Parents

An Overview

Engaged Progressives live in a different world—morally speaking—than the Faithful, one that is more fluid and more lightly carried. Moral gravity, in this case, doesn't pull so strongly toward particular behaviors. At the center of the Engaged Progressives' moral universe stands the virtue of personal freedom; with freedom comes choice and, by implication, responsibility for the consequences of one's choices. Within such a moral framework, parents must prepare children to be responsible choosers, weighing alternatives, thinking carefully through courses of action in advance. They must also grant the same freedom to others, so a virtue of "diversity" is embraced so that all may live freely and freely choose.

In their ideal, the playing field of life must be relatively even and open. Justice, therefore, defined as the universal application of fair rules, is a central concern of Engaged Progressives. Even so, it is understood that some have advantages, that there will be winners and losers, and that some will lead and others will follow in the race to achieve individual fulfillment and success.

Engaged Progressives, however, remind their children not to directly harm others. In fact, this is the closest they come to an absolute moral injunction. In their world, this "golden rule" and its moral extension—to do good for others—are in many ways sufficient to define a person as good or bad. Yet the values of honesty, openness, empathy, and rational explanation are understood to soften the social spaces in which the golden rule is applied.

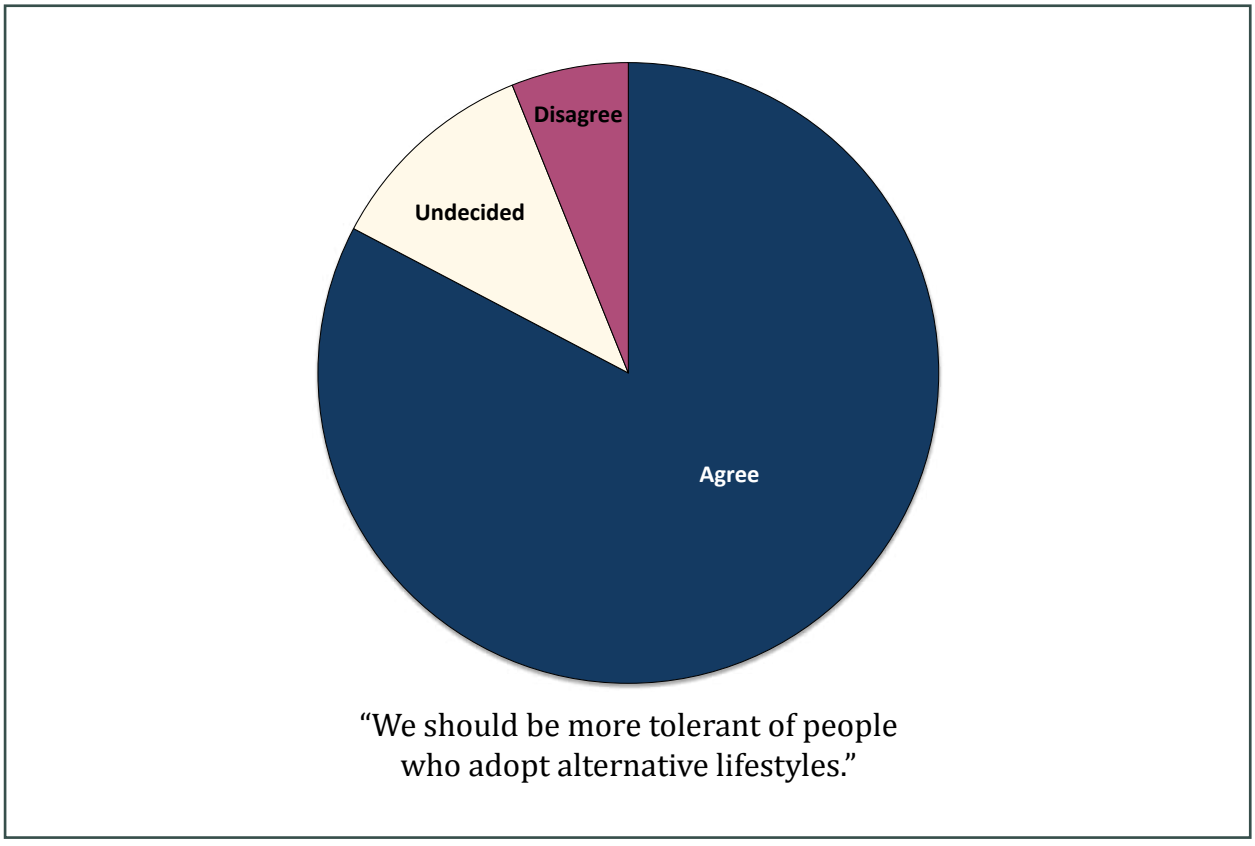
Having sidelined God as morality's author, Engaged Progressives are left with the burden of constructing moral accounts, of justifying to others why they choose this over that, of explaining why their lives are ordered in particular ways. Even when choices are obviously self-serving, Engaged Progressives are uncomfortable with the prospect of that as their ultimate goal.

The Specifics

Background Profile: Seven of every 10 Engaged Progressive parents (71 percent) are white (non-Hispanic), 17 percent are Hispanic, and very few (only 2 percent) are black. They are more highly educated than other parents—nearly half (46 percent) have completed a 4-year degree compared to 31 percent of other parents. In fact, 20 percent of Engaged parents have completed postgraduate degrees, a rate double that of other parents. Few, relatively speaking, live in the 15 southern states. Half live either in the Northeast (including New England and the Mid-Atlantic) or on the Pacific coast. Democrats outnumber Republicans by almost a 4-to-1 margin (44 percent to 12 percent), and 53 percent say they plan to vote for President Obama in the 2012 presidential election compared to 18 percent who say they will support his Republican opponent.

Family Life: Eighty percent of Engaged Progressive parents are married, and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) remain in their first marriage. An even greater number (68 percent) say they once lived with a romantic partner without being married, and most don't regret it. In fact, 67 percent say that the trend toward more people living together without getting married has been a good thing for our society. For them, it has simply become a new stage in a relational progression; those among the Engaged who "lived together" (89 percent) generally considered it a step towards a possible marriage. While the divorce rate of Engaged Progressives parents does exceed that of the Faithful (27 percent compared to 21 percent), the Engaged have not experienced more divorces than other parents nationwide. They generally display less variation in family size than other parents, having settled upon a two-child ideal for family life. (Sixty-four percent say 2 children is best compared to 41 percent of the Faithful.)

FIGURE 8 — Engaged Progressives' View of Tolerance.



Faith and Morality: In stark contrast to the Faithful, Engaged Progressive parents are the least religious of any in our study. In fact, none of them say religion is "the most important thing in my life," and only 13 percent say religion is even "very important." Instead, about two-thirds say religion is "not too important" (27 percent) or not at all important (36 percent). This reflects the fact that 3 out of 4 among the Engaged (74 percent) either have doubts about God's existence or reject the notion altogether. Few (only 10 percent) are avowed atheists; more are agnostic (17 percent) or say they believe in a "higher power of some kind" (20 percent); and even more say they "have doubts, but feel they do believe in God" (28 percent). Given the equivocal nature of their belief system, it is not surprising that over half of the Engaged (57 percent) never attend religious services and less than 1 in 5 (19 percent) attend more than several times a year. The overwhelming majority (93 percent) say that their religious beliefs are moderate or liberal, that they haven't been born again (91 percent), and that they reject the notion of a personal relationship with God (71 percent either say that they don't have one or they don't know whether they do).

Engaged Progressives feel an obligation to extend moral latitude to others, recognizing that the experiences and feelings of one person are not those of another.

While some among the Faithful might recoil at this portrait, charging Engaged Progressives with believing in little and standing for less, the truth is that Engaged Progressives embrace a moral order with its own logic and moral criteria. One thing that is high on their ethical agenda, for example, is the ideal of personal liberty. Over half (55 percent) believe that "as long as we don't hurt others, we should all just live however we want." And Engaged Progressive parents are even more supportive of a moral code advocating tolerance of others than they are of one advocating freedom for self. More than four-fifths (83 percent) agree that "we should be more tolerant of people who adopt alternate lifestyles." This is closely tied to the fact that two-thirds (64 percent) of these parents believe "there are few moral absolutes—what is right or wrong usually varies from situation to situation."

So it is not that Engaged Progressives draw no conclusions about right versus wrong; it is just that their process for separating the two is less explicit and more fluid than that of the Faithful. But it could hardly be otherwise when their "most believable authority in matters of truth" is so malleable. Rather than turning to external (religious) sources in matters of truth (as do four-fifths of the Faithful), 6 of every 10 Engaged Progressives (59 percent) turn either to their own personal experience or to what "feels right" to them personally. Such anchors are fluid enough that Engaged Progressives feel an obligation to extend moral latitude to others, recognizing that the experiences and feelings of one person are not those of another. Yet the fact that they ground truth in clearly subjective sources does not translate into a preoccupation with the self when faced with moral dilemmas. Instead, a large majority of Engaged Progressives (71 percent) say they would do "what would be best for everyone involved" if they were unsure what was right or wrong in a situation. Faced with such a dilemma, only 10 percent say they would do what would make them happy personally or improve their individual situation. Whether they actually live according to these criteria is hard to say, but their articulated moral ideal is more communitarian than self-serving or hedonistic.

As further evidence of this communitarian ideal, Engaged Progressives are cautious about embracing plainly relativistic and purely therapeutic moral priorities. While 6 out of 10, for example, agree that "the greatest moral virtue is to be honest about your feelings and desires," half of those who do (29 percent of all Engaged Progressives) say they only "slightly agree," rejecting the stronger "mostly agree" and "completely agree" endorsements. The same pattern holds for the individualistic notion that "our values are something that each of us must decide without being influenced by others." And when asked about the statement that "everything is beautiful—it's all a matter of how you look at it," almost 7 out of 10 (69 percent) agree, but again, many of these (29 percent) only "slightly agree." An even greater number of Engaged Progressives express skepticism about the assertion that "all views of what is good are equally valid." And they reject outright the notion that "the

best response in most situations is whatever keeps people from feeling uncomfortable or upset." (Nearly two-thirds [64 percent] disagree compared to only 18 percent who agree.) In short, Engaged Progressives express a large measure of skepticism about strong moral positions period. This is true whether they are grounded in faith convictions or in more individualistic moral frameworks.

Children: How does such a moral order color family life and parent-child interactions in particular? Obviously, Engaged Progressives infrequently accompany their children to church, pray with them, or talk with them about God. For instance, 58 percent say they never have a prayer or blessing with family meals and another 24 percent say it happens only rarely. Popular stereotypes suggest that their lives may be too busy for sitting down with children at all, but our data reveal that they eat together with children about as often as the Faithful. Engaged Progressives don't invoke the word "strict," however, as often to describe their parenting approach with children, yet they are more inclined to call themselves "strict" than "permissive." Generally speaking, though, they prefer the term "moderate." Their hesitancy to employ punishments such as grounding, denying opportunities to participate in sports or clubs, withholding television or internet privileges, scolding, or even the threat of a spanking confirm that there is substance behind their self-understanding as moderates in the realm of strictness.

Engaged Progressives overwhelmingly describe their relationships with their children as being "very close." In fact, they are 11 times more likely to say they are close to their children than strict with them. In many ways, their relationships with children are described similarly to those of the Faithful. In both cases, two-thirds of parents see themselves as closer to their own children than their parents were with them. And in both cases, parents tend to see themselves as less strict than their parents were.

But there are contrasts too. One-third of Engaged Progressives say that spanking children is wrong and should never be done, and over half say they have never spanked their children (28 percent) or done so only once or twice (29 percent). Their moral opposition to spanking clearly sets them apart from other parents, and they also have fewer quarrels over their children's choice of friends and more of a sense (than the Faithful, at least) that efforts to control teenagers' access to technology are futile. This distinction also plays out in their children's involvement with movies, videos, and popular music. Half of Engaged Progressives say their children are more than just moderately involved with such elements of popular culture, compared to just 30 percent of the Faithful.

Engaged Progressive parents also have a different perspective than the Faithful on what is appropriate when. Take R-rated movies: Engaged Progressives typically say it is acceptable for children to watch them by about age 16, while the Faithful think children should wait until age 18 when they can legally watch them in a theater. And a quarter of Engaged Progressive parents will let their children attend parties without adult supervision by age 16 while the Faithful make them wait until they are legally "adults." Engaged Progressive parents also let their children surf the web without any parental monitoring and hang out at the mall earlier. But the greatest difference in perceptions of what is developmentally appropriate has to do with romantic relationships. Engaged Progressives think it is appropriate for children to experience their first kiss at the age of 14 or 15, while the Faithful think children should wait until 16 or later. The same difference holds for information about sex. Engaged Progressives think children should receive information about birth control by the time they are 14, while the Faithful think they should wait until 16 or older.

The World: But there is less of a reason for Engaged Progressives to be cautious about the world "out there," for their perceptions of it are more optimistic than those of the Faithful. Where the Faithful see strong decline, Engaged Progressives see only moderate decline, if not a world where things are holding steady. Their perceptions of American moral and ethical standards; the quality of TV, movies, and entertainment; and dating and the sexual practices of teenagers, in particular, are more benign than those of the Faithful. In each case, approximately half of the Faithful see a "strong decline" compared to less than 20 percent of Engaged Progressives. Public schools too are perceived quite differently. More children of Engaged Progressives attend local public schools in the first place. And, even if they were given the option (and money) to send children wherever they wanted, two-thirds of Engaged Progressives would

keep their children right where they are—in the local public school (compared with only 37 percent of the Faithful). And why not, when 75 percent of Engaged Progressives see public schools as having a generally positive impact upon our nation's children (compared to 38 percent of the Faithful)?

In fact, the only part of the world "out there" that Engaged Progressives appear to be highly suspicious of is religion. While only 18 percent say they would be unlikely to seek advice for their children's moral development from therapists, psychologists, or counselors; and 25 percent say the same about information sources on the internet; 7 out of 10 (69 percent) say they would be unlikely to seek advice from a pastor or religious counselor. Even more (80 percent) say they would steer clear of scripture and religious teachings as a guide to moral development. And why should they turn to sources that might have a radically different view of human nature? Less than a third of Engaged Progressives, after all, embrace the traditional Christian tenet that "human nature is basically sinful." Moreover, 3 out of 4 (76 percent) believe divorce is preferable to maintaining an unhappy marriage, the same number that reject the idea that abortion is murder. And only 1 of every 10 Engaged Progressives rejects the idea of gay marriage. With this set of moral priorities, the only type of diversity that Engaged Progressives might tacitly oppose within their children's friendship network would be a born-again Christian.

It would be unfair for Faithful parents to conclude by those previous statements that Engaged Progressives have lost respect for family values or for their children's moral character. If the self-reports of Engaged Progressive parents mean anything, this is far from true. On the contrary, they are nearly unanimous (93 percent) in saying that they invest much effort in shaping the moral character of their children. And their highest aspirations, like those of the Faithful, are that their children will become adults who are honest and truthful, who have strong moral character, and who treat others in a loving fashion. We call Engaged Progressives "engaged" because they are heavily invested in their parenting and work hard at it. The general portrait of them that emerges from the data is of parents who are fully committed to their children, who are less the authority figure and less punitive than parents among the Faithful, and who are generally more optimistic about both the culture that surrounds them and their children's prospects in it. Their rejection of religion, the role of the faith community in supporting the family, and moral absolutism of any form are distinguishing features.

The Detached are pulled in many directions simultaneously and often respond by slipping to the sidelines...Their parenting strategy is to let kids be kids and let the cards fall where they may.

Some of the differences between family cultures are subtle. Mothers who still have preschool-aged children at home, for example, are about as likely to remain at home caring for them among Engaged Progressives as among the Faithful (58 percent compared to 65 percent). The difference between those mothers resides not in whether they stay at home, but how they think of themselves while doing so. The Faithful are more likely to consider themselves "homemakers" while Engaged Progressives still cite their vocational role as their occupation even though they are taking a hiatus.

The Detached—19 Percent of American Parents

An Overview

Between the clearly conservative commitments of the Faithful and the plainly progressive ones of the Engaged Progressives lies a world of less moral certainty. Moral commitment persists, to be sure, but parents among the Detached are pulled in many directions simultaneously and often respond by slipping to the sidelines. Let the Faithful and Engaged Progressives battle for the moral high ground; life to the Detached seems complex enough that the primary freedom they seek is the freedom of retreat. Their parenting strategy is to let kids be kids and let the cards fall where they may. They are skeptical about the old certainties of the Faithful, but just as skeptical about the designs and self-assurance of Engaged Progressives.

It is not that the Detached embrace moral relativism to the same extent as moral progressives—they do not—but they lack the vision, vitality, certainty, and self-confidence required to embrace any agenda, even a relativistic one. In this sense, they are more morally overwhelmed and unresolved than committed relativists. Theirs is a universe of low parental efficacy, where political, religious, and social programs are confounding, peer influence looms large, and people just try to get by. Given a choice between this plan or that strategy, their choice is to remain undecided, to stand aside, to watch what others do.

Economically, they have fewer resources than either the Faithful or Engaged Progressives; educationally, they have lower aspirations and fewer options; politically, they are independents, if anything at all. In every arena—whether parental aspirations, moral commitments, faith connections, or political preferences—they are consistently unlikely to "vote." Their families and children are as important to them as families are to other parents, but they view the paths to parental success as less pre-ordained than the Faithful and as more fickle than the Engaged Progressives.

They may quietly hope that one of their children will get lucky, becoming a celebrity, a sports star, or someone of significance, but trying to orchestrate such an outcome seems futile. There is too much to lose from the investment, too great a risk of failure, and too daunting a prospect of being played for a fool. If Engaged Progressives subscribe to the motto "nothing ventured, nothing gained," the Detached are more likely to quietly muse, "nothing ventured, nothing lost." Laissez faire parenting, for them, is a natural response to a generalized lack of certainty and a weak sense of parental efficacy.

The Specifics

Background Profile: Two-thirds of Detached parents (65 percent) are white (non-Hispanic), 17 percent are Hispanic, and 1 of every 10 is black. On the whole, they are less educated than the Faithful and especially the Engaged Progressives, with less than a quarter (23 percent) having completed a 4-year degree and nearly half (46 percent) not having attended college at all. One quarter of them have annual household incomes below $25,000, compared to 11 percent of Engaged Progressives and 13 percent of the Faithful. Of all our family cultures, the Detached have the fewest parents employed in professional and managerial occupations (33 percent). Nearly half (46 percent) are distributed across a variety of service, sales, construction and maintenance, laboring, and transport occupations.

The Detached are fairly proportionately distributed across American geographic regions, with slightly elevated percentages in the West-North Central and Mountain regions and slightly lower numbers on the Pacific coast. Democrats (28 percent) and Republicans (26 percent) are evenly represented among them, but politically they are most noted for the fact that 27 percent spurn political identification altogether, even the "Independent" designation. A third of Detached parents (34 percent) say they will vote for the Republican challenger in 2012 compared 21 percent who say they will support President Obama, but what is most notable politically is the fact that nearly half (45 percent) indicate they will vote for someone else or not at all.

Family Life: Two-thirds (67 percent) of Detached parents are currently married, and slightly more than half (54 percent) remain in their first marriage. Like Engaged Progressives, about two-thirds (63 percent) say they once lived with a romantic partner without being married, but unlike Engaged Progressives, most of the Detached (59 percent) think this trend is bad for society. Three of every 10 among the Detached (29 percent) have divorced at some point. Currently, 14 percent are divorced or separated, another 13 percent are currently living with a partner, and another 5 percent are single parents. About 1 in 4 (27 percent) indicate that they receive at least moderate help in parenting from a parent of their children who lives at a different residence. Detached parents are twice as likely as the Faithful to have only one child.

One of the most distinctive things about the Detached is that throughout our survey, they tend to check the response that says "neutral" or similar responses that suggest a certain indifference or hesitancy to commit. Yet there is enough movement and variation in their responses that we interpret this as reflecting something about their approach to life, not just to surveys. They are generally reticent; when they disagree or agree with a statement, they do so "slightly." Their responses to our questioning also reflect a lack of personal efficacy. Simply put, they appear to be parents who shrug their shoulders at many things, not

being confident enough, clear enough, or committed enough in their response to take a strong position. They are more phlegmatic than passionate, at least in the way they respond to inquiries such as ours.

We see this first and foremost in the way the Detached talk about their families. Less than 4 in 10 (38 percent), for example, say they are "very happy" in their marriages, compared to over half of other parents (52 percent). And less than one-third (29 percent) say they are "very happy" with their parenting experience overall, compared to half of all other parents. And they spend less time with their children: nearly half (43 percent) say they spend less than 2 hours interacting with children on a typical school day, compared to 27 percent of other parents. They are twice as likely as Faithful and Engaged Progressive parents to keep the television on during family meals (and watch more TV generally than other parents). They are less optimistic about the opportunities for their children's generation than other parents.

For the Detached, their story, in a word, is one of influence lost.

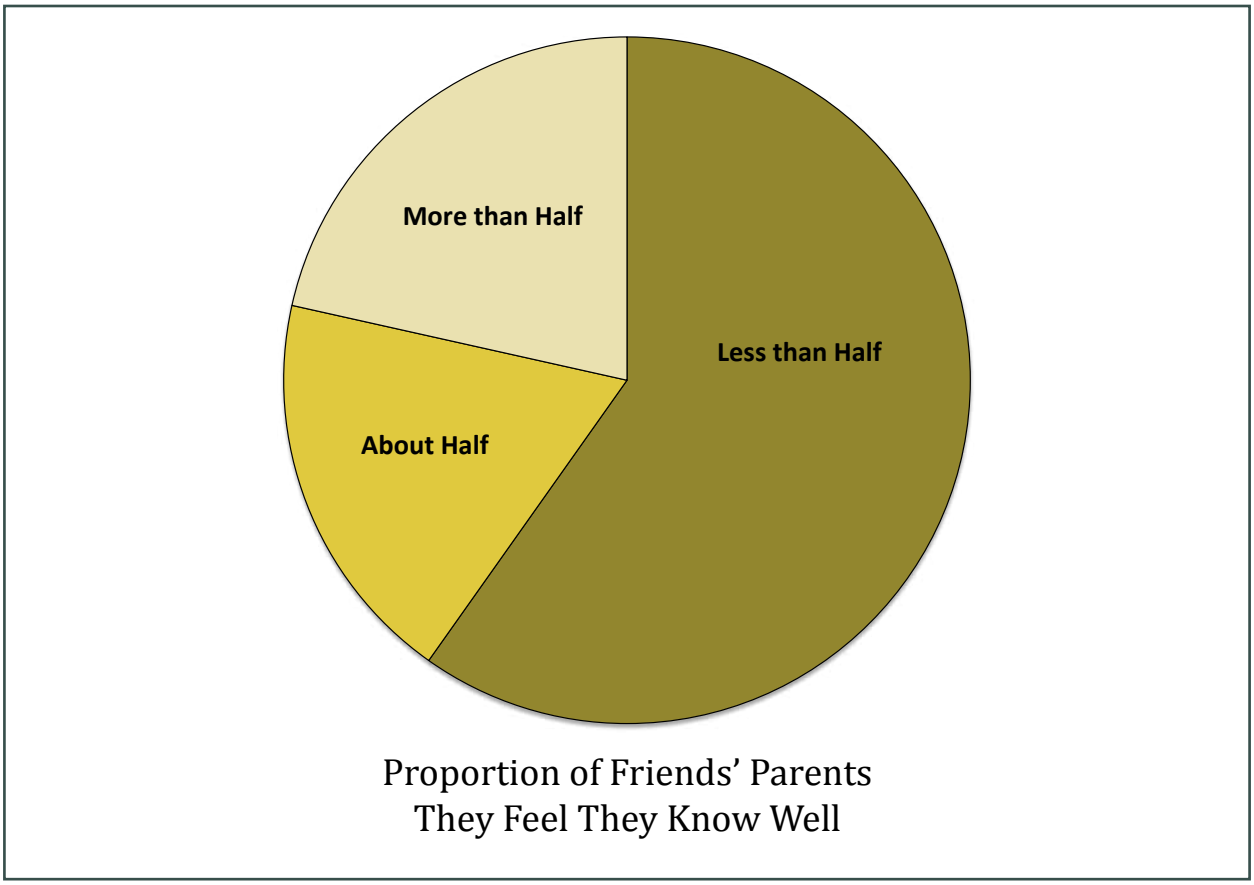
Morality and School Life: When it comes to the values and character traits that the Detached want their children to display as adults, no trait—not even honesty—is rated as "absolutely essential." (About one-third of the Detached [35 percent] consider honesty to be "absolutely essential," compared to 83 percent of other parents.) Similarly, the importance of generosity with others is discounted: 6 percent of the Detached say generosity is absolutely essential, compared to 21 percent of Engaged Progressives and 43 percent of the Faithful. And the Detached downplay "volunteering time to help others" in much the same way. Yet when it comes to being practical, the Detached are twice as likely as the Faithful and Engaged Progressives to consider "valuing practical skills over book learning" as very important for their children.

Knowledge about their country and the world, on the other hand, doesn't matter much. Only one-third of the Detached say it is "very important" for their children to become knowledgeable, compared to a solid majority of other parents (60 percent). The Detached are also less insistent that their children attend college, which isn't surprising given their children's lower academic performance in school. (Consider that children of the Detached are about as likely to be "A" students as "less than B" students, while children of the Engaged Progressives are three times more likely to be the former than the latter.)

The older teenagers of Detached parents are more likely to get into fights at school, and metaphorically at least, their parents are fighting too—if not fighting for parental influence, at least feeling ambivalent about the school's role in their children's lives. They are practical enough to realize an education is necessary, yet they wonder whether the values and perspectives embraced by professional educators connect in any way with their own. When asked how much the values they teach their children are reinforced by their children's schools, only one-third of Detached parents (34 percent) say "a great deal," compared to just over half of other American parents (52 percent). But maybe that is because the Detached offer little moral instruction in the first place. Less than 4 of every 10 (38 percent) say that instructing their children in "appropriate moral behavior" plays an extremely important role in their parenting. The vast majority of other parents (86 percent), by contrast, say that it does.

The World: So Detached parents feel at a distance from what is happening in their children's schools. High school, in particular, can become a world in which the tug of peer influence, from one direction, and professional educators, from another, seems strong enough that Detached parents find their island of parental influence eroding from all sides. In contrast to two-thirds of the Faithful and half of Engaged Progressives who believe they retain great parental influence after their children enter high school, only 29 percent of Detached parents do. And the Detached are the only family culture that doesn't reject the statement "parents today are in a losing battle with all of the other influences out there." More than most parents, they disagree with the idea that "this is a great time to be bringing children into the world." Their story, in a word, is one of influence lost.

FIGURE 9 — The Detached's Connections with Parents of Children's Friends.



Other things too seem foreign to Detached parents. They are more inclined than other parents to say that greater ethnic diversity has been bad for our society. Nearly 4 out of 5 (78 percent) say they know half or fewer of the parents of their children's close friends. And unlike friends of previous generations who could be sent home when parents chose, these friends linger, becoming invisible "strangers in the house," electronically tethered for better or worse to the children. Our data suggest too that this is more true for the Detached than for Engaged Progressives and the Faithful; only 37 percent of the Detached believe they actually have the power to control a teenager's access to technology, while nearly twice as many of the Faithful (66 percent) think that they can. In this sense, the faith of the Faithful extends beyond religion: they share a sense of parental efficacy with the Engaged Progressives that the Detached clearly lack.

Faith: The lack of confidence that the Detached display in their parenting also creeps into other areas. Consider that while 6 of every 10 Detached parents (59 percent) say they have no doubts about God's existence and another 22 percent say they believe in spite of occasional doubts, when we ask them to elaborate, the devil is in the details. For instance, 7 out of 10 (70 percent) attend religious services once a month or less, and half say they pray once a week or less. As would be expected, these personal patterns are repeated in Detached parents' interactions with their children. For instance, 70 percent have prayer or devotions with their children once a month or less, and about two-thirds (64 percent) rarely, if ever, speak with their children about matters of faith. Over half (54 percent) say their children rarely, if ever, attend church. Only one-third consider it very important that their children become persons of strong religious faith. Perhaps

most telling is the assessment of Detached parents of the importance of their own faith: only a third (34 percent) rate it as very important, compared to 56 percent of all other parents and 95 percent of the Faithful.

American Dreamers—27 Percent of American Parents

An Overview

American Dreamers also occupy a middle ground between the religious convictions of the Faithful and the "enlightened" convictions of the Engaged Progressives. And, while they are more religiously involved than the Detached, they are also more affirming of a live-and-let-live morality. Many American Dreamers—about half—are black (22 percent) or Hispanic (26 percent). Socioeconomically, they fare little better than the primarily white Detached. About 1 in 4 live below the poverty line and about half (52 percent) have household income below $50,000. In the same way, most (75 percent) have less than a college degree and just 8 percent have some kind of graduate degree. Despite such disadvantages, their aspirations for their children's futures couldn't be more distinct from the Detached. This is why we call them "American Dreamers": insofar as their children are concerned, they hope for much and invest even more, pouring themselves fully into their families' futures.

This is why we call them "American Dreamers": insofar as their children are concerned, they hope for much and invest even more, pouring themselves fully into their families' futures.

In the case of American Dreamers, however, "family" looks a little different. Structurally, it often departs from the nuclear family model. Single parenthood is common, but so are thick webs of connection within extended families. Whatever the form of family, American Dreamers understand that parents are the agents who make and enforce family rules, even though they also expect that children will test them. And when they do, American Dreamers are as quick to spank or scold as they are to praise or reward good behavior.

In short, American Dreamers are engaged parents, have some sense that "a mother knows" that "kids will be kids," and have high hopes for what their children will eventually become in the realm of character and otherwise. Compared to the Detached, the optimism and engagement of American Dreamers are clearly progressive in the sense that American Dreamers not only look upon the future with optimism, but they are also hopeful that their efforts will reap relational and material dividends for their families.

The Specifics

Background Profile: Of all our family cultures, the American Dreamers is the only one to have a majority representation of minorities. One quarter (26 percent) of American Dreamer parents are Hispanic, 22 percent are black, and 7 percent claim some other minority designation. Only 46 percent are white. Their levels of education and income are very similar to those of the Detached. Nearly half of the American Dreamers (44 percent) have received no formal education beyond high school, while only one quarter has 4-year college degrees. Just over half (52 percent) have family incomes below $50,000 a year, while only 15 percent have family incomes above $100,000 (compared to 32 percent of Engaged Progressives). Geographically, American Dreamers are distributed much like the Faithful, with large concentrations in the South (44 percent, compared to 33 percent of other parents) and few living in the Western states (17 percent, compared to 27 percent of other parents).

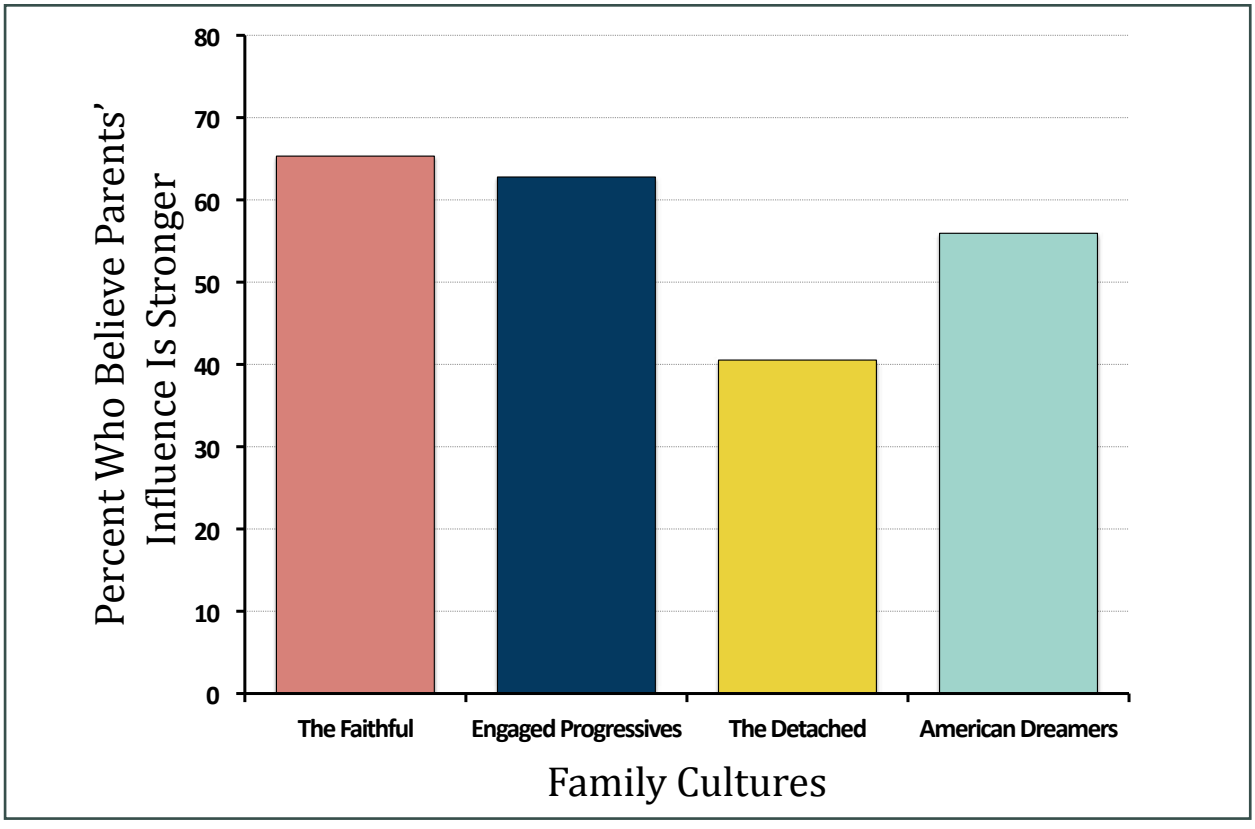
Politically, they are less partisan than Engaged Progressives or the Faithful, but they do lean more toward the political stance of the former than the latter. Some 36 percent claim to be Democrats and 26 percent to be Republican, while 38 percent say they are Independent or express no party identification at all. It follows that American Dreamer parents are nearly twice as likely as the Detached to say they will support President Obama in 2012, with 37 percent saying they will vote for him, compared to 21 percent of the Detached. Yet even though a "blue" political

tilt typifies this family culture, the tilt is closely connected to its racial and ethnic composition. Consider, for instance, that whites among American Dreamers are much less supportive of President Obama (13 percent) than blacks (92 percent). We must not, therefore, think of culture as free floating or disconnected from the social and economic circumstances in which it occurs. At the same time, we should not write it off as a mere reflection or artifact of those same circumstances.

Family Structures: Like their racial and ethnic composition, the American Dreamers' family structures differ from those of other parents. Less than two-thirds (64 percent) are currently married, compared to 76 percent of other parents. This relatively low proportion of married couples is similar only to the Detached, but what it means to be "unmarried" in the two cases differs. For the American Dreamers, being unmarried means being divorced or separated (for 39 percent), being someone who has never married and parents alone (for 34 percent), or living with a partner (for 22 percent). Among the Detached, on the other hand, being unmarried more commonly means living together with a partner (41 percent), but less often denotes a solitary parent who has never married (16 percent). Unmarried parents are disproportionately women, so the ratio of women to men among the American Dreamers is higher than for other parents in our study. All of these patterns are connected to the heavy concentration of ethnic minorities among the American Dreamers, as is the reality that there are more unmarried women (29 percent of all the American Dreamers) than in any other family culture. In fact, over half of the black parents among American Dreamers (53 percent) are unmarried women.

Family Life: Like all family cultures except the Faithful, most American Dreamers (66 percent) have lived with a romantic partner outside of marriage, and like the Detached, they say this trend is bad for society. Even though over half (55 percent) are still

FIGURE 10 — Perception that Parental Influence Is Stronger Than "Other Influences Out There[7]" by Family Cultures.



married to their first spouse, the proportion is lower than for the Engaged Progressives and the Faithful. At some point in their lives, over a quarter of American Dreamers (27 percent) have divorced. In short, their family patterns are variegated with more departures from the nuclear family archetype than among other family cultures.

As a consequence, the number of American Dreamers who say they have "no real support network" is somewhat higher than for other family cultures—nearly 1 in 5 (19 percent). Yet it would be misleading to conclude that this represents the prevailing pattern. Rather, most American Dreamers claim to be "fairly well" (20 percent) or "very well" (26 percent) supported by a network of family and friends. It is true that because of the number of unmarried, more American Dreamers (19 percent) receive "no support at all" from a spouse than among other parents (11 percent), but they make up for it in other ways. They are more likely, for example, to receive support from extended family members and from other sources in the community than are Engaged Progressives. Indeed, their pattern of parenting is less autonomous in general, for a variety of cultural and socioeconomic reasons.

> When push comes to shove, many American Dreamers are "softies," wanting to remain on good terms with their children even as they seek to point them in the right direction.

Children: Educationally and economically, American Dreamers find themselves in similar circumstances to the Detached. So why not combine the two? Because, while their economic situation may be similar, their cultural response to that situation differs dramatically. Take their expressed level of investment in their children. American Dreamers are twice as likely as the Detached (61 percent compared to 28 percent) to express clearly that they invest heavily in providing opportunities to give their children a competitive advantage down the road. Similarly, 85 percent express clearly that they invest heavily in shaping their children's moral character, compared to just 49 percent of the Detached. And the American Dreamers, who seem particularly worried that predators, drugs, and other risks might threaten their children's future, also express clearly that they invest heavily in protecting their children from negative social influences; 7 of every 10 (68 percent) say they do so, compared to just a third (33 percent) of the Detached. Yet even with this heavy level of investment, American Dreamer parents are inclined to think they should be doing more.

Basic Hope and Optimism: Beyond what it says about their daily activities, the investment of the American Dreamers in their children is a reflection of something deeper, something at the core of their cultural makeup. They live and breathe a faith and hope that things will be better. They are nearly twice as likely to say their children's generation will have greater opportunities than their own, than to say they will have fewer. Compared to other parents, they are more likely to say that "public schools these days have a positive impact upon our nation's children." And their optimism is contagious, at least within their families: nearly half (48 percent) say their children have "very positive" attitudes toward school, and most of the rest (37 percent) say their children's attitudes are "mostly positive." Their faith in the power of education is unrivaled. Virtually all American Dreamer parents (92 percent) say it is very important, if not essential, that their children become highly educated, compared to 71 percent of other parents. Similarly, 92 percent say being "smart" or "intelligent" is very important, compared to 75 percent of other parents.

Faith: Their religious faith, however, is another matter. By traditional standards of religiosity, they are more religious than the Detached, and much more religious than the Engaged Progressives. Yet the picture is mixed. Four out of 5 (81 percent) express complete certainty that God exists, and roughly two-thirds (63 percent) say religion is very important in their lives. Even so, unlike the Faithful, few American Dreamers (16 percent) say religion is "the most important thing in my life." This parallels their thinking about their parenting purposes. Nearly two-thirds cite "raising children whose lives will reflect God's will and purpose" as one of their primary goals, yet roughly a third (36 percent) call it their top priority. Just as many (35 percent) say their top priority is offering "the kind of love and affection that will nurture happiness, positive feelings about themselves, and warm relationships with others."

Therapeutic Morality: This signals the therapeutic sensibility that is common among the American Dreamers. Three-quarters (74 percent), for example, say that "the greatest moral virtue is to be honest about your feelings and desires"; fewer than 1 in 10 (9 percent) reject this moral tenet. Nearly 9 of every 10 (86 percent) list becoming "loving" as an "absolutely essential" quality for their children, compared to just half (50 percent) of other parents. Half of the American Dreamers say that "what their personal experience teaches them" or what "feels right to them personally" is the most believable authority in matters of truth, compared to just a third who point to scripture, prayer, or the counsel of religious leaders. Most say that "sharing information and emotions freely with children" describes their parenting approach better than "preserving clear parent/child boundaries." And why? In the end, they are more likely than any other family culture to say, "I hope to be best friends with my children when they are grown." Four out of 5 American Dreamers (82 percent) agree with this statement, compared to 69 percent of other parents.

Even so, American Dreamers express a greater willingness than other parents to use discipline to correct their children's misbehavior. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent), for instance, say that imposing "time-outs" and sending children to their rooms are very important corrective tools (compared to 42 percent of other parents). And over half (57 percent) say that scolding or speaking in a strong voice is an important corrective (compared to 35 percent of other parents). American Dreamers, though, are not big spankers. Just under a quarter say that spanking is relied upon as a very important way to correct misbehavior; they generally reserve it for rare situations when "nothing else seems to work." In fact, a gap exists between the way American Dreamers classify "spanking" and the way they classify the "threat of spanking." Spanking itself is strongly endorsed by only a quarter of American Dreamers, yet the threat of spanking is rated as very important by twice that many (50 percent). This gap suggests that when push comes to shove, many American Dreamers are "softies," wanting to remain on good terms with their children even as they seek to point them in the right direction.

3

Thoughts for Practitioners

The Reality Gap—"Not My Kids"

It may be that the biggest barrier to intervention with troubled kids or kids engaged in high-risk behavior is their parents. Parents worry about all sorts of challenges to their children's development and vitality, but they have difficulty admitting to their children's problems, preferring more optimistic assessments of their own family. It is no wonder that birth control for teenagers remains controversial nationally when so many parents believe their own children have no need for it. The same can be said of alcohol abuse, drug use, obesity, and other risky behaviors. In short, for all of their worry and concern, American parents may actually be less concerned than they should be.

The gap between our study's findings regarding *parental perceptions* of children, and data on children nationwide from other sources, may stem from several things. Parents may be so emotionally tied to their children that they lose the capacity for clear assessment of their children's troubles. This may stem in part from children selectively disclosing only what they believe their parents want to hear. Beyond shielding themselves as children from their parents' disapproval, children may also want to protect their parents from the pain of disappointment.

It could also be that over-invested parents derive so much of their personal identity from parenting that they cannot admit to themselves that their children may be merely average, or even below average in some respects. Indeed, the boundaries may have blurred to the point that any admission of a child's deficiency, or that a child is to blame for a negative incident, becomes a confession of their own deficiency or blame as parents. By the same token, their children, as extensions of themselves, must succeed because their children's successes signal that they have succeeded as parents. Their children, in a word, are a mirror unto themselves.

These ideas are at least worth considering in light of our data. To the extent that parents are out of touch with their children's problems, it is clearly a problem for practitioners who work with parents and families. It has also long been a problem for teachers who find parents increasingly unwilling to acknowledge their children's wrongdoings in school settings.

The Quandary of the New Therapeutic Familism

Many scholars have described this pattern in the modern American family. Its roots, in fact, trace back well over a century. Our study merely confirms that the new therapeutic familism is pervasive nationally, cutting across class, race, ethnicity, and faith. It points to a transformation in the nature of parental authority and a transformation in the nature of child rearing in which the identities and roles of parents and children have become blurred. Spending time with children "at their level" has taken the place of teaching, guiding, and discipline, which are the more traditional forms of American parenting.

There is a range of unintended consequences. At an age when all sources of authority (institutional and individual) suffer erosions of legitimacy for both structural and cultural reasons, a generation of children is being raised with equivocal authority within their own homes. Many parents are less confident in authoritarian forms of discipline, and as traditional authority relationships weaken, they turn to constant communication and close relationships to influence their children. Parents walk the fine line of wanting to be strict, but also wanting to be close friends and confidants of their children.

The Relative Autonomy of Parents

By and large, whether by choice or by constraint, most parents are "going it alone." They find support from their spouse or partner, and among single parents, from their extended family. They do not turn to their neighbors for parenting support, and only small numbers, relatively speaking, turn to local institutions such as faith communities and after-school programs. Nevertheless, most say they have the support they need. For those who do find support in after-school programs, it is extremely important to them. The same can be said for those who look for support in their church, synagogue, temple, or mosque. The support that these institutions provide matters greatly.

There is a small but significant minority, however, that is disconnected from any meaningful support system and, among these, many who need help. Community groups and organizations must consider more intentional ways to reach beyond the families they are currently serving. The social institutions and extended families that once supported parents are now largely absent from their lives, leaving them without clear maps. As one mother we intervewed noted, "without guidance, it really makes you feel that you're driving with a blindfold."

The Challenge of Technology

Many parents feel their attempts to control the home and to keep external influences at bay are nearly futile in the face of new communication and entertainment technologies. These technologies introduce a host of unknown and often unwelcomed influences into the private space of the home. The overriding concern is the negative influence that parents are unable to keep out. Many feel helpless in the face of these technologies and uncertain about how, or if, to limit them.

The genie of these new technologies cannot be put back in the bottle. The question, rather, is how to gain some modicum of control over the family's use of them. Some resources are available, though to our knowledge, they are not widely known. But even so, this will continue to be an area that calls for new ideas—ideas that many parents would be eager to put to use.

The Need for Safety

Today's parents are hypersensitive about the risks and dangers that might befall their children. Most of them do want to be able to give their children more freedom to play and socialize with other children, but they lack the resources to do so. Parents report finding few places where they can comfortably let their children play freely. This is not only a stress factor for parents, but it is physically and emotionally unhelpful for children to miss out on free play with their friends.

The Significance of Family Culture

The dominant ways in which we think and talk about the moral life in American society is through the language and concepts of psychology. It is the leading way in which we think about the moral formation of the young and the role of teachers and schools. By extension, it is through the language and concepts of psychology that we think about moral leadership in politics, business, and social movements. The premise of this paradigm is that moral qualities of goodness and character reside within individuals and that these qualities simply need to be "called out" into expression in the decisions made by individuals. Added all together, these individual decisions constitute the basis of a good society.

Psychology is clearly one important component of the moral life of individuals and communities, but it is not the only component. The moral life of individuals is also very much a reflection of the moral life of the community in which those individuals live. As scholarship concludes, to achieve a formation of healthy young people of good character presupposes a culture that expresses and embodies the qualities that make up good character. If, for whatever reason, the culture of a local institution or community does not express and embody a vision of health and goodness, then it will be impossible to form individuals—especially the young—in the same way. *In formation, it is the culture and the community that gives shape and expression to it that is the key.* Healthy formation is impossible without a healthy culture embedded within the warp and woof of family and community.

It is true that the seedbeds of virtue are found within many overlapping domains that would include the school, peer relationships, places of worship, the

internet, and popular culture, but most important of all is the family and its culture. Family culture acts as a filter for the larger culture, and its role in forming character ideals among the young is fundamental and irreducible to other factors. Whether or not parents are deliberate about it, they create a moral ecology through which children come to understand and internalize the moral life of the larger world.

The four family cultures distinguished in our investigation—the Faithful, the Engaged Progressives, the Detached, and the American Dreamers—are not merely reflections of collective psychology. They are defined, as we noted, by more than mere parenting styles. As cultures, they are constituted by a complex configuration of moral beliefs, values, and dispositions and are largely independent of basic demographic factors, such as race, ethnicity, and social class. Though largely invisible, these family cultures are powerful. They constitute the worlds that children are raised in and, therefore, are crucial elements for understanding the moral life of children and their families.

It is, therefore, important that practitioners, schools, and other social support systems become aware of the nature and characteristics of family cultures in order to understand their particular perspectives, orientations, motivations, and possibilities, but also their barriers to support for each.

Endnotes

[1] Robert Wuthnow, "The Family as Contested Terrain," in Steven M. Tipton and John Witte, Jr. (eds) *Family Transformed: Religion, Values and Society in American Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 73.

[2] Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[3] "Overweight" is children, ages 2 to 19, with a BMI at or above the 85th percentile. "Obese" is children, ages 2 to 19, with a BMI at or above the 95th percentile. Data is from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2007–2008, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data is reported in Cynthia L. Ogden, Margaret D. Carroll, Lester R. Curtin, Molly M. Lamb, and Katherine M. Flegal, "Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007–2008," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 303 (2010): 242-249.

[4] Culture of American Families: "Overweight" is children described by their parents as "somewhat overweight" or "greatly overweight."

National Center for Health Statistics: "Overweight" is children, ages 2 to 19, with a BMI at or above the 85th percentile. Data is from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2007–2008, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data is reported in Cynthia L. Ogden, Margaret D. Carroll, Lester R. Curtin, Molly M. Lamb, and Katherine M. Flegal, "Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007–2008," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 303 (2010): 242-249.

[5] It is important to keep in mind that these findings pertain to the percent of parents reporting such occurrences among their children, not the percent of American children; even so, the numbers attest to issues that a substantial number of American families are wrestling with in the culture of contemporary parenting.

[6] Here "Family with Diagnosed Child" and "Diagnosed Child" refers to any family that has at least one child who has been clinically diagnosed with Attention Deficiet Disorder (A.D.D.), Attention Deficiet Hyperactivity Disorder (A.D.H.D.), or an anxiety or depressive disorder.

[7] This figure represents the percent of parents who disagreed with the following statement: Parents today are in a losing battle with all of the other influences out there.

RESEARCH TEAM

Carl Desportes Bowman, PhD, Director of Survey Research, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia.

James Davison Hunter, PhD, Executive Director, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory, University of Virginia.

Jeffrey S. Dill, PhD, Co-Director of the Agora Institute and Research Assistant Professor of Social Thought, Eastern University.

Ashley Rogers Berner, DPhil, Co-Director of the Moral Foundations of Education Project, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia.

Joseph E. Davis, PhD, Director of Research, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and Research Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Virginia.

Tony Tian-Ren Lin, PhD, Research Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia.

Megan Juelfs-Swanson, MA, Associate Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and Research Assistant, Culture of American Families Project, University of Virginia.

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