

## **Raw Transcript: “A Debate on Fatherhood” Hosted by the National Marriage Project at UVA and the American Enterprise Institute**

April 25, 2023, University of Virginia

*(Note: this is an unedited transcript of the event).*

**Louis Nelson:** Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Louis Nelson. I’m the Vice Provost for Academic Outreach here at the University of Virginia. And I’ve been on the faculty here at UVA for 22 years. It’s my great delight to welcome you this afternoon/evening to a really important event that is a model for the kind of scholarship, the kind of engagement, the kind of critical thinking that is central to the making of an excellent university. When I first received the invitation from Brad to say just a few words, he used a really important phrase in the email request to me. And that is viewpoint diversity. Diversity, as we all know, is essential to the health of any university. Diversity is a really fundamental component to the complexity and the richness of a community. And every university is a community. It also helps to broaden our understanding, and broaden our minds and our imaginations, for the importance of diverse perspectives.

But engaging across diversity also sharpens our perspectives and it sharpens our thinking. And any university that is not prepared to engage in complex and robust engagement across difference, especially in a moderated model like this, is not a university worth its chops. And so, the University of Virginia is committed to a sustainable democracy. We understand ourselves as a public university committed to pushing a healthy democracy forward. And this kind of event is essential to that kind of critical thinking, both for us as faculty, as well as students, as well as contributing to the scholarship that shapes the future, as we all think about. So thank you so much, Brad, for inviting me. Welcome. And I look forward to hearing from our eminent speakers.

**Brad Wilcox:** Thanks to Louis Nelson for that gracious welcome to our debate tonight. UVA definitely needs more debates like this one we’re about to have. I’m grateful to Think Again and the Blue Ridge Center also for . . . I’m grateful also to Think Again and to the Blue Ridge Center for co-sponsoring tonight’s debate. And they’ll be bringing more debates like this one to ground next year. My name is Brad Wilcox. I’m a professor of sociology and the Director of the National Marriage Project. And I’m pleased to MC tonight’s event on

fatherhood and marriage. And I could not be more honored to have two of the finest minds on this topic with us to debate tonight, whether strengthening fatherhood depends upon renewing marriage in America. But before we get to their differences, I want to underline some common ground with our two speakers tonight. Both of our guests know that dads matter for kids, dads matter for communities, and dads matter for the country at large. And both are exemplary fathers. So they agree that dads matter, but they disagree about how much marriage needs to anchor future efforts to strengthen fatherhood.

Richard Reeves, the author of *Boys and Men*, a Brookings Senior Fellow, and the former Director of Demos, the London-based political think tank, will be arguing that we can and must strengthen the institution of fatherhood without necessarily renewing marriage.

Ian Rowe, the author of *Agency*, an American Enterprise Institute Senior Fellow, and the former CEO of Public Prep, a nonprofit network of public charter schools based in the South Bronx and the Lower East Side of Manhattan, disagrees. He'll argue that the path towards stronger fatherhood runs right through renewing marriage this evening.

Now, just let me have kind of two housekeeping details before we begin. One is that, if you're in my class and you haven't signed in electronically, you can sign in at the front of the class after we're done here with the debate. And then the second thing that I want to mention is, we're going to have basically 15 minutes for each speaker to kind of give their perspective. Then I will interview them kind of on their comments. And then we'll open up the conversation to the audience here more generally. So that's kind of the plan for our evening debate and conversation. So then I'm going to turn over the floor to Reeves to begin. And thank you.

**Richard Reeves:** Thank you for the invitation. It's kind of weird, isn't it? We're going to block each other before we even start. So I'm delighted to be here and have this debate. Among other things, I'm the biographer of John Stuart Mill, the 19th century liberal philosopher. Whether that makes me better or worse in your eyes is something we can get to you in Q&A. But the reason I raise that is because Mill had this beautiful description of how you should think about a debate when you're disagreeing with somebody. He said, it's almost always the case, you should think of the opponent in your debate as someone that's trying to climb the same mountain as you, they're just choosing a

different route. And I think that speaks to how Brad opened this conversation. Which is that, I know because Ian and I know each other, that we absolutely share a commitment to the flourishing of children, of men, and of women.

So, everything that we disagree about and what follows has to be seen in the light of that, what I think is a constructive disagreement. So I'm just going to use my time to sort of set out my case for fatherhood, and to some extent, as fatherhood and motherhood for the anchor of marriage rather than the other way round. I'm going to make the case for responsible and engaged fatherhood. I believe that fathers have a moral obligation to be the best fathers that they can be. And I think it should go without saying, I'm applying that to mothers as well. The evidence that fathers matter to the outcomes for children is, I think, now incontrovertible in a way that perhaps we couldn't say as recently as 10 or 15 years ago. I'm going to quote here from a study by Marc Grau Grau and Hannah Riley Bowles, Harvard scholars in family, who write the following. "The importance of engaged fatherhood is now undisputable in ways it was not in earlier decades." So there was a debate, and there's still a debate in some parts of the academy as I do dads really matter anyway. And I will say that when I've given versions of this talk in more liberal circles, I'm not saying more liberal than here, but more liberal than perhaps the average. I was at a liberal arts college recently, and I was making the case for fathers. And one of the questions took the form of saying, by saying that dads matter in ways that are distinct to, even if overlapping with that of mothers, aren't you being heteronormative?

I took the question seriously. We had a to and fro. And my answer was, if pointing to the distinct contribution of fathers makes me heteronormative, so be it. Because I think the evidence is simply incontrovertible, as Mark and Hannah pointed out in that quote. And I'm going to argue that responsible and engaged fatherhood matters for all fathers, married or not, living with the mother or not. And that therefore, fatherhood, as a social institution, and as a normative structure, has to be treated as independent of marriage. Now, that does not mean of course, that I'm calling for all the married men in the audience to leave their wives or vice versa. What I'm suggesting is that we have to think about this as policymakers from the fatherhood-first lens, rather than the marriage-first lens, which I think Ian is going to argue for. I'm going to argue that fatherhood matters. Period. Even if it's not part of the traditional package deal, whereby

being a good father and being a good husband were essentially indistinguishable.

And I think given the nature of this debate, it's important to be honest about one's own position autobiographically. I am a father, as Brad's already mentioned. I have three sons. My first son is from my first marriage. And my second and third sons are from my second marriage. I am not somebody who takes this issue lightly. I'm someone who has had to be a responsible and engaged father in the undoubtedly more difficult circumstances that follow the separation of parents. To say that it is harder is to state the obvious. But given where we are in terms of family structure and economic relations between men and women, I think it is now essential to think about fatherhood. And the reason why I think this independence of those two institutions are so important, is because the very basis for marriage, at least in recent decades, has been fundamentally altered by the change in the economic relationships between men and women. In 1979, 13 percent of women earned more than the man typical man. Today, 40 percent of women earn more than the typical the man. That is a huge challenge. It's not 50 percent, but 40 percent is a lot higher than 13 percent. Forty percent of children are now born outside of marriage. Seventy percent of black children are born outside of marriage. Forty percent of breadwinners are women.

In married couples, at least a third of those, the wife earns as much or more than the husband. These are extraordinary changes in the economic relationship between men and women in a matter of decades. I, for one, applaud the economic rise of women. But we have to be candid about the fact that that fundamentally alters the basis upon which men and women are forming families. The women's movement succeeded in its primary aim, as set out by Gloria Steinem, Margaret Mead, and others, which was to make marriage a choice, and not an economic necessity for women. To break the chains of dependency between women and men. But what about the chains of dependency between parents and their children? They remain. In my view, they are sacrosanct, whether or not the mother and father are still together. So how, if we've successfully broken the chains of dependency between women and men, do we maintain the chains of dependency, not only between mothers and their children, but between fathers and their children too. Right now, I think we're in a very difficult transition phase where we have not updated our model

of fatherhood to fit with this modern world. Hence the 40 percent of children born outside marriage.

In areas of the Bronx where Ian does his excellent work with charter schools, much higher than that. I was looking at the data and the census tract where your school is, and it's well above half. And in some of the census tracts around it, 70 percent of the households with children have a single parent, the head of that household. So in many areas of the country, the numbers are very, very much higher. But it's important that we know that it is now only a minority of children in the US who will spend the whole of their childhood with married biological parents. Most US children will not spend the whole of their childhood with their married biological parents. So, I want to be clear that I'm both describing the situation as I see it in real terms. I think I'm being a realist in this debate. But I'm also prescribing normatively, the importance of engaged responsible fatherhood, despite those changes. Becoming a divorced husband or a divorced man can never be an excuse for being a deadbeat dad. And right now, the way this debate is framed, is that there are still some on the left who have to be persuaded back to my heteronormative criticism, that dads do matter, independently. That's still a bit of a fight that I would have with some folks on the left.

But on the other hand, on the right, there's a recognition that fathers matter. But all too often, the impression is given that only if they're married. Well, what does that mean for the tens of millions of fathers who are not married, or who were and are not anymore? What's the message we're sending to that? If we're not careful, the message is, you failed. You're benched. You don't matter anymore. And that couldn't be further from the truth. I also think there are things we can do, now here's the policy wonk in me coming in, to support fatherhood, such as paid leave on an equal and independent basis for fathers. Much fairer child welfare system that treats fathers, especially unmarried fathers, much more fairly than the current system does, etc. And I would add to this debate, more access for both women and men to effective forms of contraception. It's important to get some facts on the ground here about what's been driving the rise in non-marital births, because sometimes there's an impression that back then, people were having their kids within marriage, in the sense that they were conceiving them in marriage. But that wasn't always the case.

Work by Scott Winship at the Joint Economic Committee showed that the single biggest factor explaining the rise in non-marital births was the decline in so-called shotgun marriages. And Scott's work for the JEC finds that among women with a low level of education, the bottom turnstile of education, in 1977, 26 percent of those women who became pregnant outside marriage would get married before the birth. Now it's 2 percent for that group. That puts a sharp empirical point on what's otherwise going to be a theoretical conversation, was like, OK, what about that 24 percent-point difference? Do we think the world was better when women who got pregnant outside of marriage felt obliged by social norms to get married? Or do we think that the world is better where they don't? And if you believe all in revealed preference, the fact that only 2 percent of them are choosing to get married now must tell us something. And I think what it tells us above all, is that the real problem here is very often unintended pregnancies. Fifty percent of pregnancies in the US are unplanned. And there's an almost perfect kind of linear relationship in the form of the family. One in four pregnancies within marriages are unplanned. And very often, what they mean by that is mistimed, came earlier or sometimes later, than perhaps was planned.

For cohabiting couples, 50 percent of the pregnancies are unintended. And for couples who don't even live together at the time of conception, three quarters, unintended. And so it seems to me that if we share, which I think we do, I believe in the importance of family stability and family planning, we can't ignore the fact that there is a huge problem that's caused by unintended pregnancy. And we can definitely do something about that in terms of policy, which is to make effective forms of contraception more widely available. So stuff we can do to support fathers and mothers to be more stable, more engaged. By contrast, the evidence that marriage promotion policies work is almost nonexistent. The Bush administration tried, to their credit, a bunch of programs, and especially to their credit, they evaluated them really pretty well. So we got a really good research based on marriage promotion. And you can pick a few that worked here and there. But the overall impression was pretty clearly summarized by my former colleague, Ron Haskins, at the Brookings Institution, in a piece for *National Affairs*, now published by AEI. "There is little reason to be optimistic that programs providing marriage, education, and social services will significantly affect marriage rates."

As he said, the evidence is decidedly thin to the effectiveness of marriage promotion. So even if we could promote marriage, through policy, it doesn't seem to work very well. So we can promote fatherhood. I don't think we can promote marriage. There's not much evidence. The last substantive point I'll make is that, very often in this debate, the response from thoughtful conservatives will be, this isn't a policy question, it's a cultural question. And the problem with liberals like me, who are married, even if in my case, for the second time around, is that we don't preach what we practice, to use Charles Murray's phrase. And that we should be more willing to go out there and tell people they should be doing what we're doing and getting married, etc. Two problems with that. First, people don't need persuading. Most survey evidence I see says actually that is still the ideal for most people. And good, especially for working class Americans. They're the most likely to believe that marriage is important. It's not a persuasion problem, so that people don't think it's a good idea. It's that for one reason or another, they're finding it difficult to do.

And the second reason that I don't think the preaching approach is very effective, is that . . . and I could be wrong about this. But my sense is that the American working class right now isn't in a terrifically good mood for lectures from liberal elites about how they should be living their lives. That's just my political sense of it. I don't have empirical evidence, but I just don't feel like it's going to go down very well right now, given our current politics. So I don't think the preaching is the right way to go. I think that men can and should be both good husbands and good fathers. But I don't think they have to be the former in order to be the latter. As I said earlier, being divorced, never excuses being a deadbeat. And insisting that only husbands can be good fathers, in my view, will not result in a mass reversal of these recent trends around marriage rates. It's much more likely, in my view, to send the harmful message to those who are not married, or who were married, are no longer, that they have failed, that they're already failures, and that they have effectively been benched by society.

Even if perfection is indeed loving, committed parents, in marriages that last. And I think we could agree about that as perfection. We must be extremely careful in our public policy, and our public pronouncements not to make the perfect the enemy of the good. And in the process, inadvertently send the wrong signal to fathers. Which is, well, you're not married or you're not married anymore. So, thank you, and good night. Instead of saying, life is complicated.

Life is messy. But the one unconditional moral obligation you have as a father and as a mother is to your children. No matter how they came into the world, and no matter your relationship with the mother. Responsible and engaged fatherhood is unconditional. It's not conditioned on the relationship with the mother. That's the world we live in. and I think we better make the best of it. Thank you.

**Ian Rowe:** Excellent. Thank you, Brad and Richard, and University of Virginia. And in the same spirit, let me start by doing something a bit unorthodox for debate, outlining where I think we have common ground. As someone who's run public charter schools for more than a decade in low-income communities in New York City, I have seen firsthand the issues that boys and young men face. In 2014, I opened the first all-boys public charter school in the Bronx, the South Bronx Community where the nonmarital birth rate is about 80 percent. Many of our boys had strained or nonexistent relationships with their unmarried, nonresident fathers. And as Richard advises in his book, we did our best to hire male teachers, especially in elementary school, so the boys could have consistent and positive role models. Even personally, as I think I've shared with you, my wife and I held our own son from kindergarten for a year, because of his November birthday. Another one of your recommendations in your book.

In August of last year, I launched the New International Baccalaureate High School, Vertex Partnership Academies, also in the Bronx, that will empower boys and girls to choose apprenticeships during their junior and senior years, so that they can have an alternative to the college for all approach that has dominated secondary education, but frankly, has not served our nation well. Another recommendation from your book. So we have several areas of agreement. And really, I mean, Richard and I are colleagues and friends, and I do, I have much respect for his dedication to improving the lives of boys. Yet while we share areas of agreement, the path that Richard suggests, creating fatherhood as an institution independent of marriage, and even independent of cohabitation, is a path that I believe will do further damage to the boys and men that I know Richard is genuinely seeking to help. I say this not because I'm an expert fortune teller, who can accurately predict the future, but rather because I am someone who sees the devastating impact today, of fathers when they are untethered from marriage and untethered from living with their own children.

I'm a storyteller, so let me share with you why I believe this. On July 11, 2016, at about 4 p.m., On 149th Street and 3rd Avenue in the South Bronx, I had an

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epiphany moment that forced me to look at the world in a whole new way. I led a network of schools, educating more than 2000 low income, primarily black and Hispanic students. Each year, our random lottery left nearly 5000 applicant families on an excruciatingly long waitlist. We had just decided to move our headquarters from Manhattan to the South Bronx, committed to open new public charter schools in a district in which only 2 percent of kids graduated from high school ready for college. On that hot summer afternoon, my team and I ventured out to get to know our new neighborhood. And on that walking tour, I saw a 27-foot, baby blue, Winnebago truck with graffiti lettering on the side. Adults were gathered around the truck similar to the way the kids excitedly welcome the ice cream truck. The graffiti lettering on the side of the truck said, "Who's Your Daddy?" It turned out that the Who's Your Daddy truck is a mobile DNA testing center, where low-income folks were spending somewhere between \$350 and \$500 for swab tests to answer profound questions such as, are you my sister? Could you be my father?

Demand was so robust, the second Who's Your Daddy truck provided services to other boroughs in New York, and nationally, in Washington, D.C. and Chicago. VH1 even launched a reality series called "Swab Stories." Somehow all of this family tragedy had become entertainment. I remember being struck not only by how needed the paternity testing services were by real people in fragile families, but also by the absolute normalcy and acceptance of the truck in the South Bronx. I wondered what would happen if the Who's Your Daddy truck were to show up in the Westchester, New York suburb that I live in. As the crow flies, it is just a few miles north of the South Bronx. But in some regards, it's a universe away. In my neighborhood, virtually every household is headed by two married parents. I imagined that within 30 minutes of the Who's Your Daddy truck arriving, that truck would be forced to leave.

I share this real world story of my epiphany moment because the discussion that we are about to have is not theoretical or academic. Richard's vision in some ways already exists in many struggling parts of America, in which single fatherhood is currently the norm. And where fatherhood is an institution already fully divorced from marriage and cohabitation. My vision also exists in many flourishing parts of America, where married fatherhood is the norm, and where marriage is the institution that actually strengthens fatherhood. While there are those who argue that opportunities to pursue the American dream are divided by race, class, education or gender, the brutal truth, I believe, is that today, a

parent's marital status has displaced all of those factors as the primary driver of child and intergenerational poverty. Harvard's Raj Chetty outlined this reality in his study a couple years ago, entitled, "Where is the Land of Opportunity?" In which he researched the sources of intergenerational mobility for more than 40 million children and their parents, between 1996 and 2012. The study identified cities where children from families in the lowest 20 percent of income were most likely to have incomes in the top 20 percent as adults.

Chetty found two Americas, a collection of societies, some of which he called lands of opportunity, with high rates of mobility across generations, and others, in which few children escaped poverty. A major conclusion was that, "The strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure, such as the fraction of single parents in the area." Kathy Edin, who Richard cites her work in his book, she has studied low income couples for decades, and she explains why high levels of single parenting cause a high degree of what she calls re-partnering. Which results in more than half of children born to single parents will see their moms or dads form up to four or more romantic relationships during the child's first five years of life. Many of these young parents lack good education and aren't ready emotionally, financially, or otherwise, to raise a child. And far too many of young men, themselves facing unemployment challenges, seem to be in a state of perpetual adolescence. As Richard acknowledges, family instability and disengaged fathers affects boys more than girls.

After studying more than 1 million children born in Florida between 1992 and 2002, MIT researcher David Autor found that, relative to their sisters, boys born to low education and unmarried mothers, raised in low income neighborhoods, and enrolled at poor quality public schools, have a higher incidence of truancy and behavioral problems throughout elementary and middle school, exhibit higher rates of behavioral and cognitive disability, perform worse on standardized tests, are less likely to graduate high school, and are more likely to commit serious crimes as juveniles.

Richard, I get that you feel the married two-parent family structure is outdated, and that you want to restore fatherhood by strengthening the direct relationship between a father and his children, regardless of whether or not he is in a relationship with the mother. But all the depressing statistics that we know are really an indictment of unmarried fatherhood, not married fatherhood. Where I believe your theory goes off the rails is that, in the absence of a marriage with a

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firm commitment to the mother, especially in a non-marital birth, the father's relationship you are seeking to strengthen with the child is often severed.

Marriage is the institution that first bonds the father to the mother, as her husband, the original commitment, even before children are present. Marriage is the social institution, however imperfect, that imposes a moral obligation on a father that no other institution can replicate. And certainly not the government. I agree, paid leave should be equally available to men and women. But no policy is going to bond fathers to children as effectively as having married parents. I have an empowering alternative. And we'll talk about it. But let me close by saying, respectfully, what you are proposing, I believe, is a luxury belief. An idea that confers status on the privileged who don't need to subscribe to that idea, but while that idea takes a toll on the less privileged. People who say that marriage is just an oppressive institution of the patriarchy, are usually themselves married with children, who they expect to become married with children as well. The intergenerational transmission of advantage.

As Richard shared, he's a father who's raised three boys. I am a father too, raising a boy and a girl. But Richard and I are not just fathers, we are married fathers. I do think we need to preach what we practice, as well as talk about the how. It makes no sense to emphasize the importance of healthy family engagement, while discounting the primary vehicle that drives healthy father engagement. I think you're advocating for a belief that I don't think you would ever want for your own boys. And we can talk about that. I certainly don't want it for my son, Oscar. Ultimately, I think we both want a world in which no girl or boy ever has to ask the question, who's your daddy? Because the answer will always be, he is right here. Thank you.

**Wilcox:** So, great job, both of you. And we have some time now just for the two of you to kind of respond to one another. And I thought that Richard could kind of go first with some of his comments or reflections about Ian's comments. And then we'll just obviously flip the switch. So, go ahead.

**Reeves:** So, first of all, thank you, Ian, for your kind comments, and for doing more to plug my book than I did. So you should definitely order Ian's book on *Agency*. Yeah. They're very good counterpoints, actually, the two books so. So, obviously, we agree on a lot. I think this question of being tethered is really nice phrase. And I agree that right now, the empirical evidence is that unmarried fathers who have largely, as I mentioned, become fathers

accidentally, are not doing a very good job of remaining in their kids' lives, and/or we're not doing a very good job of helping them to do that. So to put a data point on that, within six years of their parents separating, about a third of kids don't see their father. So, my response to that is not to imagine a world where we can somehow stop the parents separating, especially if they didn't plan to have the kid in the first place. Right? It's no surprise to me that young, relatively uneducated people who accidentally get pregnant and try to make a go of it, are much more likely to fail than most married couples who are college educated, who get married, and have children in exactly the way you've just described.

And so, here I'm going to quote Andrew Cherlin, whose work we all know, about the capstone idea of marriage. And I think what's happening in these upper middle-class couples, is that actually, getting married is what you do when you found the person that you want to have a family with. It's not what you do when you need someone to be the breadwinner anymore. I think it is more of a co-parenting enterprise now. And so what's happening is that marriage is a signal that these people are really committed to each other. And then I think it helps them to remain committed. But I think to some extent, what you're seeing there is just the fact that the people who are opting into marriage who are, as you say, the more upper middle-class folks, are the ones who planned to have kids with that person. And if you have children with the person you wanted to have children with, at roughly the time you planned to have children, that turns out to be a pretty awesome thing to do. And most people doing that are married. Right?

But the causality is running that way. It's not that if we could somehow march all those mothers up the aisle, and got them married when they'd accidentally gotten pregnant with the guy that they were not even living with, that they're in a relationship with, that their relationships would suddenly look like upper middle-class marriages. They wouldn't. The fundamental ingredient is that shared commitment to having and raising our children together. I want to raise children with you. And so then I think the problem is the causality issue that I would have a difficulty with. So you're right, that historically, tethering men to women, and therefore to children. Sometimes I like to describe it as, like, a dotted line relationship, and only works in organizations, right? So there was like a direct line from dad to mom and mom to kids, and then like a dotted line from dads to kids. And I think that once the relationship between the mom and

dad breaks up, if there is just a dotted line, that's why so many of them disappear. So what I'm trying to do is replace that dotted line with a solid line, and say to father's you matter, regardless.

Now, hopefully, it will be in the kinds of committed relationships we're both describing. But even if it's not, it survives. Because I just don't see how you put this genie back in the bottle really. And definitely us preaching about it is not going to work. There are no known policies that work. So, the danger is that it feels a bit hand wavy in the end. And in the meantime, millions of kids don't have their dad in their lives. And that's really what I'm worried about. So in some ways, I think your positions are more abstract and idealistic one, and mine is the more gritty and down to earth, this is the world, as it is. You're the idealist and I'm the realist. I think you've positioned it the other way around.

**Rowe:** Haha. So, thank you for that. The thing that often strikes me about this conversation, when we talk about this divide, particularly in marriage, we describe marriage as almost always in the province of the upper middle class, the elite who are . . . The causality runs . . . You know, they're getting married. And it's almost like an inherent characteristic. But, you know, I run schools in the heart of the South Bronx, right, with kids who have not yet had the opportunity to make these decisions. And my sense is that they have the same capacity to plan relationships, plan pregnancy, plan marriage, than anyone else, regardless of economic class, or, frankly, even regardless of their existing family structure. And so, you know, tomorrow, when I go back to the Bronx, and I'll see our 108 ninth graders, you know, half of which are boys. I can't imagine standing in front of the class of 14-year-olds, boys, and saying to them, "Hey, guys, you can become a father. And guess what, you don't even need to worry about getting married, nor do you even have to worry about cohabitating or living with that child." A lot of them would say, "I can sign up for that." Right?

**Reeves:** [Inaudible 00:38:57].

**Rowe:** What's that?

**Reeves:** [Inaudible 00:38:58].

**Ian:** Well, when they're 14, they're not yet . . . They are yearning and aspiring to live what they believe is the life script, which involves getting their education, because their parents have fought to get them into a charter school

like ours, getting a job, and then having children within marriage. You know, a few years ago, as we were designing this high school that we just launched in August. I went to New Orleans a few years ago to visit one of the top high schools in that city. And I visited a class of ninth graders. And I know this will be an interesting part of the discussion. But I had a chance to speak to the ninth graders and I said to them, because I was having a lot of controversy in New York teaching this particular concept that I'm about to describe to you. And I said to the ninth graders . . . And by the way, this is a group of ninth graders, almost all low-income kids, a very multiracial group. But I said to them, "If you knew that there were a series of decisions in your control, where folks who followed that series of decisions, 97 percent of them avoided poverty, would you want to know what those series of decisions are?" And they looked at me and they said, "Well, yeah, why wouldn't I want to know?"

And I said, "Well, there's some grownups who think the data is kind of wonky, that maybe it's kind of insulting, that maybe it might implicate even your parents. And so better not to tell you at all, not to tell you about that series of decisions." And they looked at me like I was crazy. Like, why would you not tell us? Tell us. Let us decide if this information is valuable to me or not. Who are you to preserve this information now that you've teased me with the likely outcomes of what that series of decisions are. So we then decided to have this conversation about what is often referred to as the success sequence. Which many people argue about it, but I think it's pretty logical, even without the data science. Basically, if you finish just your high school degree, get a full-time job of any kind, just so you learn the dignity and discipline of work. And then if you have children, marriage first, 97 percent of millennials who follow that series of decisions avoid poverty. And the vast majority enter the middle class or beyond. It's not 100 percent. It's not a guarantee, because there are no guarantees in life.

But what I found interesting about that conversation was, at the end of it . . . And by the way, we had the conversation, what I call a descriptive fashion, not prescriptive. We didn't say, you must follow this series of decisions in your life, otherwise, you'll be a failure. We just said, look, over the next 5 to 10 years of your life, you're going to be making decisions about your education, your work, your relationships, family formation. You should know that there's a series of decisions that yields this likelihood of economic success. There's another series of decisions that yields this likelihood of economic success. But at the end of

the day, you decide. You are the architect of your own lives. And what I found interesting at the end of that conversation was that, I felt that they felt that they had been respected as future decision makers of their own lives. Because I think even before we get to the fatherhood question, how about we just educate young boys to be responsible to not get pregnant in the first place. Which I'm sure you would agree with. Contraception or . . . Right? We agree that there are multiple ways that even before you get to the fatherhood, the marriage question. So this is my point, that I start from the vantage point of, I don't see marriage and lifelong commitment in the province of only the elite that we often seem to ascribe it to. And I especially don't want to take it off the table from the very outset, from young people who haven't even had an opportunity to grapple with these decisions in their own lives.

**Reeves:** Can I have the talking stick? It's good to only give us one microphone, right? Because we have to take it in turns. Well, we could get into the social science of the success sequence, but that would be boring for everybody, I think. But I will say as you know that most of the work in that equation is done by the work full-time thing. But I want to again just . . . I think I will give you the talking stick right back because we can see the same statistics around nonmarital birth rates, etc. We can see the same statistics about the fact that the majority, at least three quarters of the pregnancies to people who aren't living together are unintended. Right? They were not planning to have a child with that person. Just read Bob Putnam's work, right? It's just story after story of people's plans being derailed by an unintended pregnancy. And there's always like, well, kind of sort of didn't really plan it. You know, the ambiguity around it. And so it's very clear that that's a problem. The difference now is that, whereas maybe 30, 40 years ago, people felt like if you had an accidental out of wedlock pregnancy, there was huge social pressure to get married. That social pressure has gone away.

I find it hard to see that as such a terrible thing. I think what's terrible is if people don't have access to the opportunities to allow themselves to plan. But the way you're describing this, Ian, it sounds like you think the reason why lower income folks are not choosing to marry before they have children, which I agree would be in their economic interest, if nothing else, is because people like me are writing social science books. And I didn't suggest putting it in the curriculum, right? I'm not going to come into your school and put it into the curriculum. I'm just describing a world where the fundamental basis for

marriage that used to exist, which was based on this economic relationship for men and women, has just completely changed. The conservatives of the 1970s were absolutely right to warn that if women got economic power relative to men, that would transform family life. In fact, that's what they wanted, completely transform it. And that's exactly what's happened. And it's extraordinary, the change.

And they were right to say, well, that will bench the dads. What are we going to do with the men? They were absolutely right about that. What they were wrong about is saying, so that's why we shouldn't let women have all this freedom and opportunity. That's why the women's movement was such a terrible mistake. They were wrong then and they're wrong now. But they're right to say that that fundamental change in the economic relationship, especially between black men and black women, right, that fundamental . . . has completely altered the way in which we form families. And I now think that families are more about co-parenting. So I actually think that if we could persuade more boys and young men to be a responsible and an engaged father, which would include having the kids with the person you want to have the kids with, that would lead to more marriage. So I think that my pro-fatherhood thing will lead to more marriage. It's not the goal, but I think to the extent that marriage is now about parenting, more parenting would be good for marriage. So mine is a pro-marriage policy in disguise, it's just that I don't need it to be a pro-marriage policy.

**Rowe:** One thing . . . Because we might be getting to a good place. So, I think part of the issue, Richard, is that, I think all of your interventions start post-baby. Parental leave, child welfare, well, that's a big deal.

**Reeves:** Not like contraception? Access to contraception [inaudible 00:46:54].

**Rowes:** There is no shortage of access to contraception. Certainly, if you come with me to the Bronx, you'll find every shade of [contraception] No, seriously.

**Reeves:** [inaudible 00:47:08].

**Ian:** Well, it's not that we support it or not. Yes, people need more power, certainly, to make decisions about when and if they want to become pregnant. Absolutely. But I'm saying that, at least certainly in the neighborhoods that we've run schools, access to contraception is not the binding issue. Right? But the point is that, there are a whole bunch of things that occur with young people prior to them having sex, having children. I just mentioned that we just opened



the school in which only 2 percent of kids who start ninth grade, four years later graduate from high school ready for college. That's crazy, right? And yet, but you didn't put school choice, or charter schools, or that kind of educational freedom in your book as one of the strategies for helping young boys. It's crucial. These are the kinds of things where I feel like sometimes we are talking past each other. And this is why I run schools. I want to avoid the intervention that we're betting on that we're hoping will, you know, bind fathers to children. Paid parental leave, sure. But you know how many of these guys are unemployed, where paid parental leave isn't even on the table as an intervention anyway. Right? So that's my plea to you, is to also be as innovative, to help young men in particular, and young women, be more decisive about the kinds of things that would not put them on this pathway in the first place.

**Wilcox:** So I think as I kind of listen to both of you, the idealistic kind of dimension of Ian's argument, one could say, and that's of course, what Richard said, is sort of the marriage emphasis. But I would say to you Richard, that sort of idealistic character of the argument is thinking you can conjure up this sort of fatherhood thing, and somehow inject it into, you know, young men, and build this incredible tie between young men and their kids without the benefit of marriage. So in terms of kind of thinking about some concrete ways, we kind of talked a little about how do we kind of make the marriage piece more practical? And I think the success sequence, the curriculum is kind of what Ian would say, and part of that school. But in terms of on the practical side for fatherhood, how would you kind of make your idealistic claims about fatherhood kind of play out in a very kind of programmatic way for ordinary working class and poor young men?

**Reeves:** So I think this is actually the heart of the disagreement, I think, in some ways, which is, like, who's the greater conjurer? You know, I'm conjuring up responsible, engaged fatherhood, independent of marriage. You're conjuring up a world of marriage that is gone. And I have the advantage that there are some pretty good policy evaluations of things like paid leave for fathers, especially if it's use it or lose it. In other words, the father has to take it. Reforms to child welfare policies along the lines that Kathryn Edin and others suggest. Changes to workplace culture to encourage paternity leave, etc., actually do have some effects on fatherhood. Now, I'm not going to suggest for a moment that those policies are going to solve the problem. But I am going to suggest that the

evidence of their effectiveness is significantly stronger for the effectiveness of any known marriage promotion policy pursued by any government anywhere in the world.

So I would submit that you're the conjurer. You're conjuring up this idealistic world of marriage, which no known policy can produce. And hoping somehow that if we could just get liberal intellectuals to start yelling about marriage to working class people, that they'll say, "Oh, OK, then. Certainly, Mr. Reef, Dr. Reeves." I'd correct them. I'd say, "Actually that's Dr. Reeves." That that is somehow going to change the cultural conversation. I mean, I actually think we've got to be clear where we're putting our normative way. I think this is an important . . . Like, I'm putting my normative way on responsible and engaged parenting as much for fathers as mothers. I think that may well lead to more marriage. But given the crisis in fatherlessness we have right now, I think waiting for whether your success sequence discussion or whatever you're proposing, Brad, is going to somehow reverse this decades-long change in marriage rates, I think that's the fantasy.

**Wilcox:** And then Ian, in terms of the practical side, besides success sequence, you know, what else do you think practically could be helpful in reviving portions marriage [inaudible 00:51:58]?

**Rowe:** Well, I think the answer to that is that it's not just about marriage. Again, if we're in districts in which . . . For example, in the same district in New York City where only 2 percent of kids are graduating from high school ready for college, if you want to launch a school in this neighborhood to serve the other 98 percent of kids, you can't do it. Because currently, there's a cap on charter schools. There's a cap on the ability even to create a great school. And we were able to launch a school where the teachers union actually sued us last year. And we have been successful, thankfully. But it's just one example of the factors that we have to acknowledge all of them. It's not just about preaching marriage. Yes, I do believe, you know, teaching the success sequence is part of the solution. I mean, the Census Bureau did some data about the living arrangements of young parents. There are about 1.8 million parents aged 15 to 22 in our country today. Forty-six percent of the young men are not living with fathers at all, right? I mean, I'm sorry, not living with their children at all. What do you think those young men are doing? And Kathy Edin writes about this a lot, the sort of multiple partner fertility, and I think you've even described it, young fathers feel like failures. They're not taking care of their initial kids. And

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so they have another relationship with another woman, have a kid, and so for a spirit of time, they're committed to that child, the second child. But now they're even more absent from the first.

So how does this play into practical steps? A, let's talk to young people about this. Again, I don't hear that this is part of your strategy. I mean, I presume that you believe teaching math is important, and teaching science is important, right? Like, why would we . . . No, but it boggles my mind why we think it's not feasible to talk to young people. And again, especially . . . Something else that we do in our schools. We don't only talk to the kids, because one of the big concerns we had when we started teaching the success sequence in schools was that, you can't do this. You're going to insult the parents of our kids, because it's very likely that their parents didn't follow the success sequence in their own lives. So we realized we had to have conversations with the parents of our eighth graders, to say to the eighth-grade parents, you chose our schools because you wanted your kids to not only know about math and science, but also the habits and decisions that will make a much greater likelihood of success. And what we heard from parents was, "Thank God someone is teaching my kids about these things because I wish someone had taught me these things when we were growing up." I find that very powerful. I find the aspirations of the people who were saying, we've given up, and we've got to come up with these other interventions. And I find the feedback that I get from the very parents that I think most of us are speaking about, have very different aspirations for their own kids. So those are the kinds of tactics that I think are so important.

**Wilcox:** So I know we're getting close to 6:00, we're getting close, actually. Why don't we do just this. Because I know some of the students have to go kind of on to their next thing. Why don't we take one question for each of our different speakers tonight. And then if folks would like to kind of come down afterwards and engage our speakers more informally, we can do that. So, I'll just take one question first for Richard Reeves, and one question for Ian Rowe. OK. Did you have a question for Richard, sir?

**Man:** I came here with a lot of questions. I'm a survivor of divorce. My grandfather, grandparents got divorced in the 1960s, one of the first ones to get divorced in the lower Alabama, very poverty rich region. And my parents got divorced twice to each other. That was fun as a child. And then my wife of 14 years left me after having three children. And now I have seven children after

getting remarried and having even more children. I just really wanted to say thank you for coming here. I've enjoyed both of y'all's conversations. Engaging, thoughtful, very critical. I believe in that the institute of marriage, and the moral based institutions that are the best place to raise children. I think you guys both agree on that, too. I've done my best to be engaged with my three daughters of my previous marriage. And I found it difficult at best. It's not easy. Definitely I want it to be there. We had half custody. So I got them half the time, she got them half the time. They've grown up now.

But I did find that raising children is kind of like . . .that children are kind of like water. And if you throw a rock in front of them, the water is going to go around the rock when it came to discipline. They'll always figure out a way. And if one parent is more open to different types of liberal ideas or conservative . . . Well, I was more conservative, of course, she was more liberal. And the children always went with the easiest route. And my question is, how would y'all work around that in a separated world that we now live in, even if a father wants to be a father, and have a little bit of discipline at the same time? Thank you all very much for what you're doing. And I can throw this anywhere.

**Reeves:** Thank you. I'm just going to take the opportunity to ding Ian along the way. I don't know of any evidence that charter schools, which I'm a huge supporter of, as I think you know, improve marriage rates, which was your answer to Brad's question about a practical thing. And actually allows me to say something I could have said in an answer to Brad's earlier question about practical changes. We can change the way that divorce courts work to give more rights to fathers. We can change the way that unmarried parents are treated in the courts to give more rights to parents. Maria Cancian did a really good study. It's hard to get national data, but she did data in Wisconsin. In 1986, 80 percent, of custody awards were sole custody to the mom. That's now down to 42 percent. And 26 percent of them are now equal custody, which was up from 5 percent. And so by changing the law around how do we treat mothers and fathers in separation, it used to be, well, if they separate obviously, mom should get the kids, right? If you go back 100 years before that, it was the other way around. But now the courts have really moved. And so changing divorce laws and custody laws to actually give equal rights to fathers where appropriate is a great example of policy change that has significantly increased the extent to which fathers are still engaged with their kids. And God bless you for

continuing to remain in your kids' lives despite the difficulty I know that that can create.

**Wilcox:** How about a question, JP, for maybe Ian. Here it comes.

**f:** All right. Well, hey, thanks, guys. Really great remarks. And Richard, I really enjoyed your book. Finished it a few days ago. I want to give you some encouragement, Richard. I have a friend, Richard, who's two rows in front of me. So Richard, and I, and Brad know that we lead the largest privately fund marriage strengthening project in the country's history in Duval County, Florida, and successfully lowered the divorce rate there 24 percent in three years, through an entirely private interventions. And it was independently evaluated. And we got about as favorable of a conclusion that a social scientist will ever give you about the outcomes of it. So we know that things can be done to, you know, I know in Duval County, there's close to 3000 more marriages that are stable today, kids in their homes than would have otherwise happened. I think a lot of the questions about whether or not interventions can increase marriage rates. I don't think there's been much done to focus on creating that. I think Hungary has got some small evidence right now.

I would respond that there's very little evidence that fatherhood programs boost fatherhood in a way that would substantively move the needle for outcomes for kids. The very best evidence that you cite in your book, right, is Paul Amato's research on patterns of fatherlessness. And the very best fathers in that group that you cite as great, non-resident dads, are unable to maintain more than once a week contact with their kids, two to three years later. So the idea that we're going to somehow restore fatherhood, absent marriage, to me is very quixotic, and certainly, I could say equally quixotic. So I raise that and would love to get any reactions or response. So, Ian, do you agree? No, I'm just kidding. So, no, no. I do think there's . . . One thing I would just say, a question of, how we can encourage I do think Richard's point of trying to go beyond K-8, K-12 education and encouraging marriage is incredibly important for those of us who care about combating poverty. And so if there's anything that you've thought in those areas outside of the K-12 arena, it would be great to hear.

**Rowe:** Sure. Well, JP, I mean, you're selling yourself short, if you're not familiar with the culture of freedom or the outgrowth organization Communio. That's the organization that JP led, which chose three locations around the country. And I think there were four outcomes that you set. One was to reduce

the teen pregnancy rate, increase the marriage rate, reduce the divorce rate, and increase faith going. And in these three communities, they've really focused . . . They built relationships with churches throughout these three communities. And the results were as JP just described. So there is a whole dimension of faith that we haven't spoken about at all. And I will say to you, Richard, one of my criticisms of the success sequence was, frankly, is that it lacks the moral dimension. In the sense of, when I've seen young people who have broken the cycle of disadvantage, you know, young people who have been in very challenging situations, domestic violence and other challenges. I've seen young people as they make their decisions into young adulthood, make decisions that recreate the same disadvantage that they experienced growing up. But I've also seen young people in those same situations make different sets of decisions where they have broken the cycle of disadvantage.

And the common set of pillars or institutions that have been involved in helping that young people make different sets of decisions is what I call my FREE Framework, family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship. Where that first anchor F, is that usually young people have been making decisions along the lines of getting their education, working, and not having children until marriage. That's the pathway that they've been on. But the second big dimension is that they've usually had some kind of personal faith commitment in their life. That they lived by a moral code, usually inspired by some kind of organized religion. Didn't matter if it's Christianity, Buddhism, didn't matter, but they were part of a religious community where there were regular rituals that they participated in, where they lived . . . There were expectations of people in this community that helped them make those kinds of decisions. This is one of the challenges with things like the success sequence. How do you get people to actually stick to it? There has to be these kinds of countervailing forces. E, education, there has to be some kind of educational freedom or school choice. And then if you're on the pathway to building a strong family, having a personal faith commitment, benefiting from educational freedom, that usually leads to the last E, which is some type of entrepreneurship or problem solving within your own life. You have that characteristic. You become an agent of your own uplift.

So that's part of what I'm putting forth in my own book, *Agency*, the four pillars, that we need to have more young people understand the power that does

exist within their own hands, and not give up on them even before they've had the opportunity to make the kinds of decisions that we've been talking about.

**Wilcox:** Please join me in thanking Richard and Ian.