

America's Kids Are In Crisis — One Cultural Shift May Explain Why

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By **Karl Zinsmeister** · Mar 6, 2026 DailyWire.com ·



In the first two months of 2026, there were more than 50 mass shootings in the U.S, many in schools and churches. Assassination attempts on public figures have swelled. We see constant talk about syndromes such as "gender dysphoria" that were once almost unknown. At elite institutions such as Stanford University, four out of 10 students now [claim](#) they have disability. These occurrences illustrate a troubling paradox.

Americans today are wealthier than ever before. We've jumped ahead of Europeans and other developed nations in national economic growth and household income. Our technology has dramatically improved. Our houses are much more comfortable. Our medical care and diets are richer. Yet all around us, especially among the young, we see record levels of depression and loneliness, addiction, crime, educational failure, economic disappointment, and community decline.

There is a root to these social and psychological maladies: the explosion of out-of-wedlock births, divorce, single-parenting, father flight, careerism, and child neglect that began in the 1960s. More than half of all young Americans now live separated from one or both of their parents for at least part of their childhood. Millions of kids from all income levels, races, and localities bear scars from family instability.

Youth suicide jumped 62% from 2007 to 2021. Drug-overdose deaths among young people were nearly twice as high in 2022 as 10 years earlier. In 2023, 4,450 kids were killed by guns, most of them pointed by other youths. Family breakdown now drives many of our collective social problems: poverty, homelessness, street crime, drug abuse, educational failure, and economic lags.

These heartaches and these social problems will not go away until we manage to knit mothers and fathers and children more tightly together in natural families (biological parents committed to each other and their children). Such families are not perfect, but as a source of human happiness and success they greatly surpass single-parent families, step-families, scientifically designed group homes, hired care, and every other alternative that has been tried.

You see, we homo sapiens have a serious biological problem—called childhood. As Harvard scientist Stephen Jay Gould pointed out, "Human babies are born as embryos, and embryos they remain for about the first nine months of life." If humans were born at the stage of development more typical of other mammals, a baby would remain in utero for up to a year longer than the nine months it already does. The reason we are born "premature" instead is elemental: Very few female pelvises could expel a neonate the size of a one-year old infant. Human labor is already quite difficult compared to other animals, and newborns are only 40% the size of the average one-year old.

Premature birth solves a human physiological dilemma, but it creates a cultural one. Monkey infants can navigate independently and find and cling to their mother when they need her. Newborn horses can run from danger just a few hours from birth. Other animals can hunt, dig, swim, or fly within days of their arrival into the world. But human young remain utterly helpless for an extended period, unable even to control their own temperature, see clearly, grasp, or roll over. Even the healthiest of babies thus requires intensive care and supervision.

And the incapability of humans extends far beyond infancy. It is a long time before we are finally able to survive on our own. Most mammals are autonomous and essentially full-grown within a single season, but it takes our brains about 15 annual cycles to reach their final capacity, and our bodies even a little longer. We are far slower to develop to independent maturity than any other living creature.

This problem is made even knottier by the fact that human culture is so complex that no individual can begin to be a competent citizen until he or she has undergone years and years worth of intensive acculturation. We must absorb millions of bits of information from our progenitors—on everything from desirable foods to language—before we can safely navigate our world.

The combined result of our premature launch and our heavy dependence upon cultural transmission is an extraordinarily long and demanding childhood. Absent a critical cultural adaptation, human beings could never have thrived in the face of this constraint. But they did fashion an adaptation, and a brilliant one: the family. The traditional family was a way of capturing the energy of the male parent as well as the female and channelling it into the rearing of the young.

In this way, mothers gained an ally to help them through their vulnerable periods of pregnancy and lactation. Frail youngsters won the benefit of not one but two protectors, producers, and caretakers. And under this joint nurturing structure, reproductive success soared. Even prior to the advent of the civilized era, one out of every two human babies survived to adulthood, thanks to the aid of their families. This compares to between 10 and 30% for other primates and group-hunting carnivores, which lack any counterpart to the nuclear family. And parent-guided humans turned out to be unusually competent creatures, bearers of a rich culture.

By stitching fathers to mothers and mothers to fathers, and weaving both to their children in a mission of mutual aid, the traditional family allowed humans to transcend brutish self-interest and produce higher civilization in its full splendor.

The evidence for this is ample and ancient. In 1978, anthropologist Mary Leakey made a breathtaking discovery in a fossil lava bed in east Africa: the first human footprints, 3.6 million years old. They clearly indicate two creatures walking upright, between four and five feet tall, one larger than the other, apparently a male and a female. They were walking next to each other, perhaps holding hands, Leakey thinks. There is also a third set of prints, much smaller, belonging to a child. These are carefully placed within the larger prints—as a youngster playfully following his parents through soft ground would do. Leakey's find disputes the claim that the traditional family was invented in Victorian Europe or some other moment, and forced on humanity by narrow-minded manipulators.

Over the last generation, heaps of research findings have proven the irreplaceable benefits of the natural family, particularly when it comes to raising healthy children. I recently collected some of this evidence in a book, and it demonstrates clearly that where the traditional family is in trouble, there will be trouble all across society. This is no longer scientifically controversial. It is merely inconvenient for ideologues promoting the kind of radical individualism, sexual autonomy, and economic selfishness that are incompatible with loyal family life.

As I summarize in my book, biology, human history, recent psychological discoveries, and much more demonstrate that the traditional family is a natural and irreplaceable component of human society. It will be with us so long as our civilization flourishes. And if natural families continue to crumble, no amount of money, technology, personal liberation, artificial intelligence, or wishful thinking will be able to fend off the chaos that results when wounded youngsters grow into our next generation of citizens.

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