

# Prioritizing Child Well-Being: An Interview with Helen Alvaré (Part 2)

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Last week, we published the [first part](#) of our interview with Helen Alvaré, a law professor at George Mason University and co-founder of [Women Speak for Themselves](#), about her new book, *Putting Children's Interests First in U.S. Family Law and Policy*. In part 1, she discussed how the federal government promotes “sexual expressionism” in its response to the problems associated with nonmarital childbearing. This week, we pick up where we left off, focusing on how sexual expressionism influences child well-being, as well as on Professor Alvaré’s recommendations for improving the government’s response to nonmarital childbearing.

**Alysse ElHage:** *You accuse the government of “reckless indifference” when it comes to the welfare of children born outside of marriage, specifically because, as you argue in the book, the government policy of sexual expressionism “weakens the parent-child relationship.” Explain what you mean by that—how does sexual expressionism negatively impact the relationship between parents and their children?*

**Helen Alvaré:** It’s well-accepted intellectually today that there are causal elements in the relationship between family structure and child well-being. It is so often discussed that it is inconceivable that federal judges and members of Congress or executive branch experts could be unaware of it. Of course, they do know and grasp this point, but choose to promote policy designed to help disadvantaged children “at the back door” *after* adults have made their sexual choices at the “front door”; or promoting contraception in order to prevent especially poor children from being born in the first place. I have discussed the latter policy already. But even the former policy—necessary and well-intended as it is—does not adequately address what nonmarital births mean for the parent-child relationship: the loss of parental time and inputs; the loss of social networks and other intergenerational contributions; the loss of parental benefits arising out of a couple’s mutual support; lower income; lost role-modeling; and an increase in relationship instability between the parent and his or her partner, which regularly follows a nonmarital birth. This instability is widely acknowledged to be a leading factor in children’s compromised outcomes.

**Alysse ElHage:** *In the last chapter, you offer a number of recommendations for shifting the focus of government policy and programs away from sexual expressionism toward the needs of children. And we talked last week about your suggestions for improving the government’s contraception policies. But you also call on the government to “capacitate men and women for marriage” by improving their economic and employment prospects. What are some ways the government can improve job opportunities?*

**Helen Alvaré:** Here is where I wish I had the silver bullet par excellence. When I think about America’s continuing failure to more rapidly adjust its employment and education policies to changing labor markets, globalization, and the effects of family breakdown, I get mad and sad at the same instant. What could be more important for a government

domestically than providing solid educational and employment prospects especially to the poorest among us? Why are we not utterly ashamed of our record on these matters as a wealthy country? Considering the relationships between human dignity and health and family formation and community stability to adequate employment—how have these matters failed to rise to the very top of the agendas of either political party? The ideas I share regarding enhanced job opportunities are gleaned from experts in that arena and are not original to me. They include: better tailoring of education to labor market realities—in particular improving community colleges’ attention to this need; apprenticeships, which are a subject taken up by IFS more than once. I would add to these, improved job training combined with an improved minimum wage, in order that even lower-paid workers understand the importance of their contribution to an employers’ overall success.

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**Alyse ElHage:** *Let’s talk about your most important (and perhaps controversial) recommendation, which is for the government to promote marital childbearing in its programs and policies. You go further than some other scholars who have called for a national campaign for marriage, by calling for the government to “articulate the needs for stable marital parenting wherever it speaks about sex.” What would this message look like—how would it differ, for example, from the federal healthy marriage initiatives we’ve seen in the past?*

**Helen Alvaré:** I am aware on the one hand how controversial it might seem to some to recommend that the government speak about stable marital parenting “wherever it speaks about sex.” Sex is considered by many as existing in a private realm free of government influence. But on the other hand, this isn’t true at all! Federal websites and Supreme Court Justices talk about the good of sex as freely as commercial media does. They say that it’s crucial to human happiness and self-expression, that the power to have sex without children is an essential mark of female freedom, and that sexual expression comes in a wide variety. When government agencies were partnering with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (now Power to Decide), they even officially recommended its “Bedsider” campaign, which featured tips for single women for weekend sex, and urged them to remember that even “sexylicious” women have had more than one “walk-of-shame.”

I’m only recommending that—for the good of children especially (and women and men too)—when the government inevitably talks about sex, it should do it right: it should remind adults that children’s well-being is at stake when sex happens. It’s at stake not only because contraception fails or people may choose against it, but because sex unlinked to any thought of love or future or family undermines the stability of the couple who might be parents sooner or later. Some fatherhood and healthy marriage programs have sometimes spoken about the links between sex and child well-being, but I am suggesting injecting this positive message into a far wider array of public initiatives.

**Alyse ElHage:** *You also want the government to “cease implying that there is little hope for restoring marital childbearing among the less advantaged,” and instead, “adopt a civil rights tone, about empowering the disempowered.” As someone who grew up without the benefit of married parents, I love the idea of thinking about married parenthood as a basic human right for children. Tell us more about this approach and why you see it as key to shifting the focus of government policies and programs toward what is best for children.*

**Helen Alvaré:** I have a lot of experience dialoguing with poorer women about sex, marriage, and parenting. These are natural goods, which, of course, they desire. Today, everybody knows that along with everything else that wealthier women and men have more of, they have more marriage and marital parenting, too. Existing solutions are insufficient. We have more unintended pregnancies and nonmarital parenting among poorer Americans today than we had before large-scale government funding of contraception and social welfare programs. Clearly, something more is needed. But it’s easy for politicians and even many interest groups to continue demanding these same programs because most people associate them with care for the poor. I would like to introduce here the language of “civil rights” not only because it’s warranted—these are basic human goods at stake to which every human being has an equal claim—but because it might “wake people up.” It’s hard to get past the same-old, same-old. Civil rights causes have demonstrated the power to do just that.

**Editor’s Note:** *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or views of the Institute for Family Studies.*