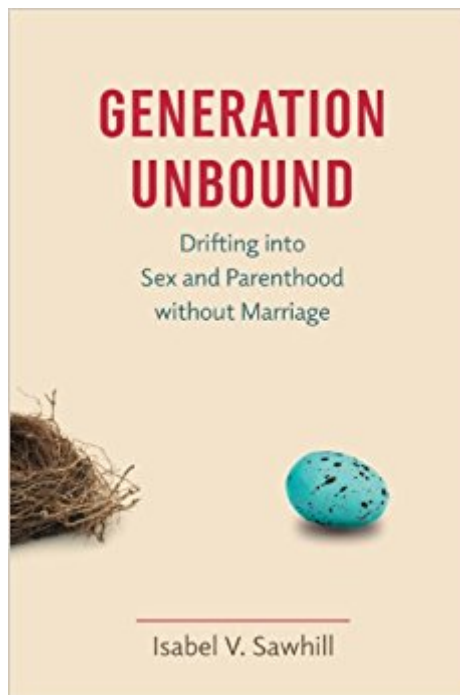




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Generation Unbound: Drifting Into Sex And Parenthood Without Marriage



Synopsis

Over half of all births to young adults in the United States now occur outside of marriage, and many are unplanned. The result is increased poverty and inequality for children. The left argues for more social support for unmarried parents; the right argues for a return to traditional marriage. In *Generation Unbound*, Isabel V. Sawhill offers a third approach: change "drifters" into "planners." In a well-written and accessible survey of the impact of family structure on child well-being, Sawhill contrasts "planners," who are delaying parenthood until after they marry, with "drifters," who are having unplanned children early and outside of marriage. These two distinct patterns are contributing to an emerging class divide and threatening social mobility in the United States. Sawhill draws on insights from the new field of behavioral economics, showing that it is possible, by changing the default, to move from a culture that accepts a high number of unplanned pregnancies to a culture in which adults only have children when they are ready to be a parent.

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Customer Reviews

In *"Generation Unbound,"* author Isabel Sawhill explores the de-coupling of marriage and parenthood in American families. In the years since 1970 which she uses as a benchmark, Sawhill reveals in detail the predictions of Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his seminal work of five years earlier (1965), in which he warned of perils to the black family as a result of rising rates of single parenting. What has happened in the 50 years since then has affected black families, Hispanic families and white families. Almost unbelievably, approximately 70 percent of black births are now

out of wedlock. Hispanics are next; and then come whites. Sawhill doesn't mention it in "Generation Unbound" but Asian-American out-of-wedlock births are still very low in comparison to all others. What is going on? Sawhill points to a tipping point which occurred when the age of first marriage became higher than the age of parenthood. In sum, children were born and present before marriage occurred. Of significance, such is not the case for college-graduate Americans, whose investments in education, a number of years in the workforce and marriage keep out-of-wedlock births at low levels. Where the out-of-wedlock birth rates have become especially problematic is in the 20-to-30 year old range, among those solely with a high-school diploma or with some college only. Unlike the past where single parentage may have been accidental because of death or primarily because of divorce, today it is happening largely because young women are having out-of-wedlock births either by accident or choice. Even with the most effective contraceptives in human history and with the option of legal abortion, the out-of-wedlock birth rate is at an historic all-time high.

American family life has changed remarkably in my lifetime. I wonder what the changes mean for our future. This is a complex book because it covers so much ground: adult-adult relationships; adult-child relationships; contraception and abortion; related family law; economic and workplace changes; and public policy. The subject matter is changing almost daily, but it involves lifelong commitments, especially to children. A Washington Post review got me interested in the book. Dr. Sawhill shows the convention of marriage, arising over thousands of years, unraveling in the past fifty. She supplies plenty of data, especially regarding adverse effects on low income, single-parent children. Two results seem clear. First, low-income children face new challenges in preparing for and succeeding in adulthood. Second, the man-woman, until-death-do-us-part marriage no longer reflects living arrangements for most Americans—especially those with assets below the top 25 percent. I found the adverse impacts on children surprising. Low income children in single parent families probably have a high likelihood of repeating the same economic struggles as their parents. Their plight affects all Americans. Dr. Sawhill seeks public policies that change the game. She hopes that parents will plan for children and welcome them into nurturing homes. She supports existing education, health, and income supplements but notes these are not enough. Her key finding is that a high proportion of parents drift into unplanned and sometimes unwanted children. Existing contraception policies are not working. She calls for a shift to long acting reversible contraception (LARC), probably offered under the Affordable Care Act.

"Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood" is an important and comprehensive

expose of how unplanned parenthood in the lives of the "drifters" (low income/poor) severely limits economic success and opportunity. Half of all US births to unmarried young adults are unplanned. Sociologist Isabel V. Sawhill examines these startling trends without judgment, as she draws a comparison to the "planners" college educated adults, who establish their careers before marriage, marry within their class, their children are carefully planned, their divorce rate low. These "planner" families reach a level of stability and economic prosperity not experienced by the "drifters". With decades of research available to support her findings, Sawhill discusses the cultural acceptance of the "hook-up culture" recreational sex; also unwed parenthood- the taboo and stigma against this from the 1950's-1960's where sexual relationships led to commitment and marriage. Single parent families represented only 7% of the population in 1950 and increased to 32% in 2013. Ambitious college students focus on their education first, followed by established employment, marriage and children. The "hook-up" culture clearly benefits men the most, (affecting college, middle class, and lower income people) also multiple partnered relationships where single parenthood (and the children born of these unions) are the norm and culturally accepted, without the stability of marriage. Economic prospects for men and women with only a high school education/GED are limited to low wage work typically in the service economy. This has particularly reduced the pool of marriageable men, especially with the rates of male incarceration factored in.

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