

UPF USA webinar - He for She at Home: Gender Equality Starts at Home

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United States -- The NGO Committee on the Family-NY with support of UPF sponsored a webinar on March 25, 2021, on the topic "He for She at Home: Gender Equality Starts at Home" as a parallel event of the 65th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. UPF, which has General Consultative Status at the UN, is an executive member of the NGO Committee of the Family-NY and was represented in the webinar by Lynn Walsh, who is also director of UPF's Office of Marriage and Family. The webinar was attended by 122 participants.

The speakers were Dr. Carolyn Pape Cowan, adjunct psychology professor emerita, and Dr. Philip A. Cowan, psychology professor emeritus, both at University of California, Berkeley. The speakers co-directed three longitudinal intervention studies of how family relationships affect children's development and social adaptation. They also are married, successful coparents. Beside numerous other publications on the family and parenting, they coauthored *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*.

In their joint presentation, Drs. Cowan made a strong argument that the quality of the relationship between the parents clearly affects children's well-being overall and influences attitudes toward both sexes. They stated often during their presentation that a cooperative and happy mother–father relationship is less likely to instill negative sex stereotypes. The positive, active, and daily engagement of fathers has a significant impact on the satisfaction of the mother. A father's positive involvement also results in his daughter's higher self-esteem, better social development, academic performance, healthier and longer lasting romantic relationships, and positive expectations of how she should be treated by males. The Cowans noted that years ago fathers were generally seen as unimportant, and only 10% of participants in parenting programs were fathers. More recently, social services and parenting programs have increased their efforts to involve fathers in interventions and education. However, today agencies often fail to address or try to include the couple unit. This is a serious oversight as research indicates that unresolved couple conflict predicts in children aggression, hyperactivity, depression, social withdrawal, academic problems, and overall poorer development.

For this reason, the Cowans developed and evaluated a series of intervention groups particularly designed for both the father and mother. These programs address five risks: the parents as individual, the parent–child relationship, couple relationship, family of origin patterns, and external stressors and potential supports. The approach of these groups effectively facilitated parents' open discussion and mutual support from other parents as well as stimulated a couple's ability to cooperatively solve problems themselves.

One of the Cowans' concerns, well documented in research, is the decrease in couple satisfaction for new parents. In the evaluations of programs that focused primarily on parenting, couples in the control group reported declined relationship satisfaction as predicted. However, the couples receiving the intervention at least maintained the same level of satisfaction as before, which was a step forward. The Cowans were happy to see that the intervention that focused on parenting successfully reduced harsh parenting, children's depression and aggression.

In different studies, programs focused on the couple relationship, not primarily on parenting. These couples showed less stress, psychological distress, violent problem solving, and conflict, more father involvement, and improved couple relationship satisfaction. These parents became less authoritarian in their parenting, and the children were less depressed, less aggressive and performed better in school. The Cowans were delighted to see that focusing on the couple relationship not only helped the couple's happiness but also decreased the children's behavioral problems and improved their performance and emotional development, even five years later. In fact, helping the couple strengthen their relationship turned out to yield the most significant improvement for the children.

The Cowans recommended that governments create "Departments of Family Security" and broaden funding, programs, and policies to support parents. Expanding interventions to include a couple focus creates more stability within the parenting unit and, therefore, critical emotional security for the children. The Cowans asserted that stable families effectively foster children's healthy attitudes toward sex differences and gender equality. Their message was that change that starts, not from top down but from the bottom up, from the starting point, meaning within the couple relationship, will bring about the sustainable social changes we all want and families deserve.