CPYU Trend Alert:
How's Your Family Changing? by Walt Mueller

If your home is at all like mine, you're currently buried in preparations for Christmas. At our house, Christmas is a time for our family to celebrate the life-giving coming of the Savior into the world. On Christmas day, our little family of six – Dad, Mom, and four kids – will spend quality time together as we've now done for several years. Being a sentimental type of guy, I always spend some time on Christmas Day sitting back watching my kids while quietly evaluating who we are as a family, who I am as a Dad, the joys and sorrows of the last year, and my hopes and prayers for the year to come.

In the midst of a rapidly changing culture, I've found this annual exercise to be a healthy way to consider how our family can better reflect the Kingdom of God that entered into the world through the birth of Christ. Perhaps the exercise is urgent for me because of what I regularly see and hear as I study the emerging youth culture. When I began to ask my high-school-aged audiences about their family situations, their first-person descriptions, combined with several shows of hand, led me to the conclusion that *family* meant something different to many of these kids. Some lived with Dad and Mom. Others lived with Mom. Some with Dad. Some with neither. A few didn't know either one or both of their parents. The words *divorce, separation, abandonment,* and *abuse* came up over and over again.

Sadly, those responses are becoming more and more typical. You and I are living in a period of unprecedented and historic change in family composition, family life, and family experience. This radical shift in family patterns can't help but affect our kids, creating more stress and confusion. This shift is both the result and cause of a growing amount of childhood heartache, pain, and difficulty.

As you prepare to celebrate the coming of the Kingdom of God into our broken world, take some time to consider some of the disruptive and destructive changes taking place in the American family. Then, prayerfully consider what you can do prevent these trends from rearing their ugly head in your home.

The first change is *the increase and acceptance of divorce*. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s combined with a changing moral climate, rising individualism, and other factors to lower our collective view of marriage, thus leading to a rise in divorce. In 2004, there were 7.8 marriages per 1,000 people (2,279,000 total) and 3.7 divorces per 1,000 people. The American divorce rate today is nearly twice that of 1960, but has declined slightly since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980s. It is estimated that up to 60 percent of the children born in the nineties – today's children and teens - will live in a single-parent home for part of their childhood. All of these statistics add up to this sad fact: The United States has the highest divorce rate and the highest proportion of children affected by divorce in the developed world! My one-on-one conversations with and observation of children of divorce have led me to a deeper understanding of the toll that divorce takes on our kids. The family was created by God as the basic unit and building block of society. It is the unit into which we are born and where we find our identity, are socialized, and are nurtured. The increased incidence and acceptance of divorce indicates that, in many cases, the building block is falling apart. As our society changes, husbands and wives are becoming more committed to being uncommitted. The result is that more and more children suffer.

A second change is *the rise in cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births.* A lower view of marriage has combined with changing morals and the experiences of so many adults having grown up in families where marriages fell apart, to leave a growing number of people ready to live together and have families, and without the willingness to commit. In 2004, 35.7 percent of all births were to unmarried women. Since 1970, the number of people living together outside of marriage has increased by over 1000 percent. Not only do these trends affect children's well-being as they grow through childhood and adolescence, but they also influence the growing child's own view of marriage. The 2003 Gallup Youth Survey specifically asked teens about their views on cohabitation. A significant majority (70 percent) of teens say they approve of couples living together prior to marriage. As might be expected, 85 percent of teens who do not attend church approve of pre-marital cohabitation. But alarmingly, 50 percent of teens who regularly attend church approve of couples living together before marriage. Clearly, the culture is influencing our kids' values and attitudes.

A third change is *the crisis of fatherlessness.* Tonight, approximately 34 percent of our nation's children and teens will go to bed in a home where their biological father does not live. Some estimate that almost 60 percent of the children born in the 1990s will spend some part of their childhood in a fatherless home. Sadly, more and more children don't even know who their fathers are. Millions of other children are growing up in a home where their fathers may be physically present but are spiritually or emotionally detached. The consequences are grave. We now know that father absence is the number one variable in the present and future well-being of teens. Children who grow through the difficult, challenging, and formative years of adolescence without their dads have a greater risk of suffering from emotional and behavioral problems such as sexual promiscuity, premarital teen pregnancy, substance abuse, depression, suicide, lower academic performance, dropping out of school, intimacy dysfunction, divorce, and poverty.

A fourth change is *the decreasing amount of time that parents are spending with their children.* Men and women in high-pressure careers often work more than forty hours a week and bring home work pressures and economic worries. Children are the ones who get shortchanged. The ongoing myth of "quality time vs. quantity time" is often invoked to justify absence from the kids. When asked about their wishes for a better life, 27 percent of high school students wanted "more money to buy items such as televisions and cars," and 14 percent wished for "a bigger house." But the overwhelming majority of high school students – 46 percent - wished for "more time spent together with family."

Fifth, *more and more children and teens are victims of family violence.* It's frightening to think that much of our nation's child abuse and sexual abuse goes unreported. The statistics that are available are frightening enough. It's believed that one out of every four girls in the United States and one out of every six boys is sexually abused by the time they reach the age of 16. Most of the abuse is perpetrated by a parent, sibling, or close relative. In addition, studies indicate that between 3.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually. Some of that violence is the direct result of alcoholism in the family. Children who are exposed to or are victims of family and sexual violence are more likely to become perpetrators of violence themselves. They're also more likely to exhibit a variety of health and behavioral problems as they grow up, including depression, anxiety, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Home used to be a place of refuge and a source of much-needed resiliency for kids growing through the normal difficulties of the adolescent years. I remember how great I felt entering the warmth of my house after battling the pressures and expectations of my peers at the war zone known as school. While my family was by no means perfect, I at least knew that when I got home, I could open the door and walk into never-ending encouragement, acceptance, and love.

But many teens don't share my experience. Some time ago, after being away with a group of kids on an exciting senior high retreat, I noticed that every kid on the bus was asleep – except for Meg. She was staring out the window. The tears running down her cheeks told me she was thinking about more than the passing scenery. I thought she might be disappointed that the weekend had come to an end. "Sure, I'm sad the weekend is over," she said. "But that's not what I'm crying about. My Dad hasn't talked to me or my Mom in weeks. He just sits in his chair and watches TV. My Mom's an emotional basket case. Sometimes I feel like I'm her mother. And my brother – he yells at all of us. I don't want to go back home." Meg's home had become a war zone.

Meg's sad story is only one example of how the changing face of the family is taking its toll on kids. The result is a hunger for genuine and meaningful relationships so pervasive among teenagers and young adults today that experts cite "relational deprivation" as one of the marks of today's emerging generations. Our children and teens were created to be in relationship. Humanly speaking, the primary relationship for which they were made is one with dad and mom. Today's teenagers desire real relationships that are characterized by depth, vulnerability, openness, listening, and love – connectedness in their disconnected, confusing, and alienated world. As your family gathers together this Christmas, bring honor and glory to the Savior whose birth we celebrate by evaluating how well you're doing to bring the Kingdom that's come, to come and live under the roof of your home.