

### **Like other parents most unmarried parents....**

- are responsible, loving and doing their best for their children
- can be lonely, isolated, poor, harassed.

### **And need....**

- a bit of support now and then with their parenting
- an adequate amount to live on
- secure affordable accommodation
- accessible, affordable child care
- a chance to enhance their level of skill and education.

### **Unlike most parents unmarried lone parents....**

- may rear their children alone, 24 hours a day
- may feel particularly isolated
- may be both provider for and carer of their children
- can be condemned for going out to work and **not** rearing their children
- can be condemned for **not** going out to work and “sponging” off the State
- may feel stigmatised by others.

### **And need....**

- support, friendship and encouragement
- freedom to choose to work outside the home or be a full-time parent
- acceptance as a valid family unit that does not require a “solution”
- constitutional protection for their children and family unit
- to be accepted as good people and good parents.

**They need our help and support - not condemnation**

# UNMARRIED PARENTS

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

*not just a  
“single” issue*

### **In days gone by...**

Generally, unmarried women who became pregnant in Ireland in the 18th, 19th and earlier part of the 20th centuries were shunned by neighbours and cast out by their own families - effectively separated from mainstream society. As families and communities rejected them many mothers found refuge in workhouses, in Magdalen homes and psychiatric hospitals and sometimes stayed in these institutions for life. Very often their children were placed with families or died in these institutions. Infanticide was not unknown. Enforced marriage was another “solution” to unmarried pregnancy.

In the more recent past unmarried pregnant women went to England, where they were known to medical and social services as PFI (*Pregnant From Ireland*), or went to mother and baby homes in Ireland to hide their “disgrace”. Their children were placed for adoption either in Ireland or America.

In 1964 Michael Viney reported in the Irish Times that *public attitudes - not the law - are primarily responsible for a lot of unnecessary suffering* among these mothers.

### **And today....**

The vast majority of unmarried parents are living in the community with their children (most mother and baby homes are now closed). They are generally accepted within their own families. It could be observed that the attitude of society has changed considerably and unmarried parents and their children are largely accepted in Irish society.

### **Are they?**

Unmarried parents are still one of the poorest groups in society, can be in the worst housing and are demonised by sections of the media. Many parents experience negative attitudes towards themselves and their families from others, including from prospective employers and landlords. A 1998 study of Irish women who had abortions reported that one of the significant factors in deciding on abortion was the stigma attached to pregnancy outside marriage.

### **Isn't it time we tried to understand the truth about unmarried parents?**

In 2001 there were over 18,000 births outside marriage. These births were to unmarried parents in a wide variety of situations:

- older parents, double income, professional, cohabiting (possibly in second relationships)
- a mother in education, training or employment, supported by her parents, the father involved, on her way to becoming independent of the Social Welfare system
- a young mother living with her family, the father not taking part in the child's life
- a mother living alone in a bedsit with little support from her family or the father of her child
- a couple, planning marriage sometime in the future

...and many others.

### **Statistics and research show that -**

- There has been no significant increase in the number of births to women under 20 in the last 19 years.
- The One-parent Family Payment to unmarried parents accounts for approximately only 5% of all Social Welfare spending.
- There is no evidence to show that women become pregnant simply to avail of social welfare payments and easy access to local authority housing.
- There is no evidence to show that children in unmarried families fare less well than children in married families.