

SHOULD WE LIVE TOGETHER?

What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage

A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research

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Executive Summary

Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women. When blushing brides walk down the aisle in the 1990s, more than half have already lived together with a boyfriend.

For today's young adults, the first generation to come of age during the divorce revolution, living together seems like a good way to achieve some of the benefits of marriage and avoid the risk of divorce. Couples who live together can share expenses and learn more about each other. They can find out if their partner has what it takes to be married. If things don't work out, breaking up is easy to do. Cohabiting couples do not have to seek legal or religious permission to dissolve their union. Not surprisingly, young adults favor cohabitation. According to surveys, most young people say it is a good idea to live with a person before marrying.

But a careful review of the available social science evidence suggests that living together is not a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce. What's more, it shows that the rise in cohabitation is not a positive family trend. Cohabiting unions tend to weaken the institution of marriage and pose clear and present dangers for women and children. Specifically, the research indicates that:

- Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage.
- Living together outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women, and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children.
- Unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and well-being than married couples.

Because this generation of young adults is so keenly aware of the fragility of marriage, it is especially important for them to know what contributes to marital success and what may threaten it. Yet many young people do not know the basic facts about cohabitation and its risks. Nor are parents, teachers, clergy and others who instruct the young in matters of sex, love and marriage well acquainted with the social science evidence. Therefore, one purpose of this paper is to report on the available research.

At the same time, we recognize the larger social and cultural trends that make cohabiting relationships attractive to many young adults today. Unmarried cohabitation is not likely to go away. Given this reality, the second purpose of this paper is to guide thinking on the question: "should we live together?" We offer four principles that may help. These principles may not be the last words on the subject but they are consistent with the available evidence and seem most likely to help never-married young adults avoid painful losses in their love lives and achieve satisfying and long-lasting relationships and marriage.

1. Consider not living together at all before marriage. Cohabitation appears not to be helpful and may be harmful as a try-out for marriage. There is no evidence that if you decide to cohabit before marriage you will have a stronger marriage than those who don't live together, and some evidence to suggest that if you live together before marriage, you are more likely to break up after marriage. Cohabitation is probably least harmful (though not necessarily helpful) when it is prenuptial - when both partners are definitely planning to marry, have formally announced their engagement and have picked a wedding date.

2. Do not make a habit of cohabiting. Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences, both for your own sense of well-being and for your chances of establishing a strong lifelong partnership. Contrary to popular wisdom, you do not learn to have better relationships

from multiple failed cohabiting relationships. In fact, multiple cohabiting is a strong predictor of the failure of future relationships.

3. Limit cohabitation to the shortest possible period of time. The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely it is that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what is required for a successful marriage.

4. Do not cohabit if children are involved. Children need and should have parents who are committed to staying together over the long term. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents and the effects of breakup can be devastating and often long lasting. Moreover, children living in cohabiting unions are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence, including lethal violence, than are children living with married parents.

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Living together before marriage is one of America's most significant and unexpected family trends. By simple definition, living together-or unmarried cohabitation--is the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household. By 1997, the total number of unmarried couples in America topped 4 million, up from less than half a million in 1960.¹ It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner (the data are typically reported for women but not for men). Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, compared to virtually none earlier in the century.² What makes cohabitation so significant is not only its prevalence but also its widespread popular acceptance. In recent representative national surveys nearly 60% of high school seniors indicated that they "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement "it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along." And nearly three quarters of the students, slightly more girls than boys, stated that "a man and a woman who live together without being married" are either "experimenting with a worthwhile alternative lifestyle" or "doing their own thing and not affecting anyone else."³ Unlike divorce or unwed childbearing, the trend toward cohabitation has inspired virtually no public comment or criticism. It is hard to believe that across America, only thirty years ago, living together for unmarried, heterosexual couples was against the law.⁴ And it was considered immoral--living in sin--or at the very least highly improper. Women who provided sexual and housekeeping services to a man without the benefits of marriage were regarded as fools at best and morally loose at worst. A double standard existed, but cohabiting men were certainly not regarded with approbation.

Today, the old view of cohabitation seems yet another example of the repressive Victorian norms. The new view is that cohabitation represents a more progressive approach to intimate relationships. How much healthier women are to be free of social pressure to marry and stigma when they don't. How much better off people are today to be able to exercise choice in their sexual and domestic arrangements. How much better off marriage can be, and how many divorces can be avoided, when sexual relationships start with a trial period.

Surprisingly, much of the accumulating social science research suggests otherwise. What most cohabiting couples don't know, and what in fact few people know, are the conclusions of many recent studies on unmarried cohabitation and its implications for young people and for society.

Living together before marriage may seem like a harmless or even a progressive family trend until one takes a careful look at the evidence.

HOW LIVING TOGETHER BEFORE MARRIAGE MAY CONTRIBUTE TO MARITAL FAILURE

The vast majority of young women today want to marry and have children. And many of these women and most young men see cohabitation as a way to test marital compatibility and improve the chances of long-lasting marriage. Their reasoning is as follows: Given the high levels of divorce, why be in a hurry to marry? Why not test marital compatibility by sharing a bed and a bathroom with for a year or even longer? If it doesn't work out, one can simply move out. According to this reasoning, cohabitation weeds out unsuitable partners through a process of natural de-selection. Over time, perhaps after several living-together relationships, a person will eventually find a marriageable mate.

The social science evidence challenges this idea that cohabiting ensures greater marital compatibility and thereby promotes stronger and more enduring marriages. Cohabitation does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce; in fact, it may lead to a higher divorce risk.

Although the association was stronger a decade or two ago and has diminished in the younger generations, virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded by cohabitation. A 1992 study of 3,300 cases, for example, based on the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households, found that in their marriages prior cohabitators "are estimated to have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46% higher than for noncohabitators." The authors of this study concluded, after reviewing all previous studies, that the enhanced risk of marital disruption following cohabitation "is beginning to take on the status of an empirical generalization."⁵

More in question within the research community is why the striking statistical association between cohabitation and divorce should exist. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that those people willing to cohabit are more unconventional than others and less committed to the institution of marriage. These are the same people then, who more easily will leave a marriage if it becomes troublesome. By this explanation, cohabitation doesn't cause divorce but is merely associated with it because the same type of people is involved in both phenomena.

There is some empirical support for this position. Yet even when this "selection effect" is carefully controlled statistically a negative effect of cohabitation on later marriage stability still remains.⁶ And no positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage has been ever been found. The reasons for cohabitation's negative effect are not fully understood. One may be that while marriages are held together largely by a strong ethic of commitment, cohabiting relationships by their very nature tend to undercut this ethic. Although cohabiting relationships are like marriages in many ways-shared dwelling, economic union (at least in part), sexual intimacy, often even children-they typically differ in the levels of commitment and autonomy involved. According to recent studies cohabitants tend not to be as committed as married couples in their dedication to the continuation of the relationship and reluctance to terminate it, and they are more oriented toward their own personal autonomy.⁷ It is reasonable to speculate, based on these studies, that once this low-commitment, high-autonomy pattern of relating is learned, it becomes hard to unlearn.

The results of several studies suggest that cohabitation may change partners' attitudes toward the institution of marriage, contributing to either making marriage less likely, or if marriage takes place, less successful. A 1997 longitudinal study conducted by demographers at Pennsylvania State University concluded, for example, "cohabitation increased young people's acceptance of

divorce, but other independent living experiences did not." And "the more months of exposure to cohabitation that young people experienced, the less enthusiastic they were toward marriage and childbearing."⁸

Particularly problematic is serial cohabitation. One study determined that the effect of cohabitation on later marital instability is found only when one or both partners had previously cohabited with someone other than their spouse.⁹ A reason for this could be that the experience of dissolving one cohabiting relationship generates a greater willingness to dissolve later relationships. People's tolerance for unhappiness is diminished, and they will scrap a marriage that might otherwise be salvaged. This may be similar to the attitudinal effects of divorce; going through a divorce makes one more tolerant of divorce.

If the conclusions of these studies hold up under further investigation, they may hold the answer to the question of why premarital cohabitation should effect the stability of a later marriage. The act of cohabitation generates changes in people's attitudes toward marriage that make the stability of marriage less likely. Society wide, therefore, the growth of cohabitation will tend to further weaken marriage as an institution.

An important caveat must be inserted here. There is a growing understanding among researchers that different types and life-patterns of cohabitation must be distinguished clearly from each other. Cohabitation that is an immediate prelude to marriage, or prenuptial cohabitation-both partners plan to marry each other in the near future-is different from cohabitation that is an alternative to marriage. There is some evidence to support the proposition that living together for a short period of time with the person one intends to marry has no adverse effects on the subsequent marriage. Cohabitation in this case appears to be very similar to marriage; it merely takes place during the engagement period.¹⁰ This proposition would appear to be less true, however, when one or both of the partners has had prior experience with cohabitation, or brings children into the relationship.

COHABITATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO MARRIAGE

Most cohabiting relationships are relatively short lived and an estimated 60% end in marriage.¹¹ Still, a surprising number are essentially alternatives to marriage and that number is increasing. This should be of great national concern, not only for what the growth of cohabitation is doing to the institution of marriage but for what it is doing, or not doing, for the participants involved. In general, cohabiting relationships tend to be less satisfactory than marriage relationships.

Except perhaps for the short term prenuptial type of cohabitation, and probably also for the post-marriage cohabiting relationships of seniors and retired people who typically cohabit rather than marry for economic reasons,¹² cohabitation and marriage relationships are qualitatively different. Cohabiting couples report lower levels of happiness, lower levels of sexual exclusivity and sexual satisfaction, and poorer relationships with their parents.¹³ One reason is that, as several sociologists not surprisingly concluded after a careful analysis, in unmarried cohabitation "levels of certainty about the relationship are lower than in marriage."¹⁴

It is easy to understand, therefore, why cohabiting is inherently much less stable than marriage and why, especially in view of the fact that it is easier to terminate, the break-up rate of cohabitators is far higher than for married partners. Within two years about half of all cohabiting relationships end in either marriage or a parting of the ways, and after five years only about 10% of couples are still cohabiting (data from the late 1980s).¹⁵ In comparison, only about 45% of first marriages today are expected to break up over the course of a lifetime.¹⁶

Still not widely known by the public at large is the fact that married couples have substantial benefits over the unmarried in terms of labor force productivity, physical and mental health,

general happiness, and longevity.¹⁷ There is evidence that these benefits are diluted for couples who are not married but merely cohabiting.¹⁸ Among the probable reasons for the benefits of marriage, as summarized by University of Chicago demographer Linda Waite,¹⁹ are: 1) The long-term contract implicit in marriage. This facilitates emotional investment in the relationship, including the close monitoring of each other's behavior. The longer time horizon also makes specialization more likely; working as a couple, individuals can develop those skills in which they excel, leaving others to their partner. 2) The greater sharing of economic and social resources by married couples. In addition to economies of scale, this enables couples to act as a small insurance pool against life uncertainties, reducing each person's need to protect themselves from unexpected events. 3) The better connection of married couples to the larger community. This includes other individuals and groups (such as in-laws) as well as social institutions such as churches and synagogues. These can be important sources of social and emotional support and material benefits.

In addition to missing out on many of the benefits of marriage, cohabitators may face more serious difficulties. Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times what they are among married couples.²⁰ And women in cohabiting relationships are more likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse. Some research has shown that aggression is at least twice as common among cohabitators as it is among married partners.²¹

Again, the selection factor is undoubtedly strong in findings such as these. But the most careful statistical probing suggests that selection is not the only factor at work; the intrinsic nature of the cohabiting relationship also plays a role.

WHY COHABITATION IS HARMFUL FOR CHILDREN

Of all the types of cohabitation, that involving children is by far the most problematic. In 1997, 36% of all unmarried-couple households included a child under eighteen, up from only 21% in 1987.²² For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.²³ By one recent estimate nearly half of all children today will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16.²⁴

One of the greatest problems for children living with a cohabiting couple is the high risk that the couple will break up.²⁵ Fully three quarters of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents split up before they reach age sixteen, whereas only about a third of children born to married parents face a similar fate. One reason is that marriage rates for cohabiting couples have been plummeting. In the last decade, the proportion of cohabiting mothers who go on to eventually marry the child's father declined from 57% to 44%.²⁶

Parental break up, as is now widely known, almost always entails a myriad of personal and social difficulties for children, some of which can be long lasting. For the children of a cohabiting couple these may come on top of a plethora of already existing problems. One study found that children currently living with a mother and her unmarried partner had significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children from intact families.²⁷

It is important to note that the great majority of children in unmarried-couple households were born not in the present union but in a previous union of one of the adult partners, usually the mother.²⁸ This means that they are living with an unmarried stepfather or mother's boyfriend, with whom the economic and social relationships are often tenuous. For example, these children have no claim to child support should the couple separate.

Child abuse has become a major national problem and has increased dramatically in recent years, by more than 10% a year according to one estimate.²⁹ In the opinion of most researchers, this increase is related strongly to changing family forms. Surprisingly, the available American data

do not enable us to distinguish the abuse that takes place in married-couple households from that in cohabiting-couple households. We do have abuse-prevalence studies that look at stepparent families (both married and unmarried) and mother's boyfriends (both cohabiting and dating). Both show far higher levels of child abuse than is found in intact families.³⁰

One study in Great Britain did look at the relationship between child abuse and the family structure and marital background of parents, and the results are disturbing. It was found that, compared to children living with married biological parents, children living with cohabiting but unmarried biological parents are 20 times more likely to be subject to child abuse, and those living with a mother and a cohabiting boyfriend who is not the father face an increased risk of 33 times. In contrast, the rate of abuse is 14 times higher if the child lives with a biological mother who lives alone. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the most unsafe of all family environments for children is that in which the mother is living with someone other than the child's biological father.³¹ This is the environment for the majority of children in cohabiting couple households. Part of the enormous differences indicated above are probably due to differing income levels of the families involved. But this points up one of the other problems of cohabiting couples-their lower incomes. It is well known that children of single parents fare poorly economically when compared to the children of married parents. Not so well known is that cohabiting couples are economically more like single parents than like married couples. While the 1996 poverty rate for children living in married couple households was about 6%, it was 31% for children living in cohabiting households, much closer to the rate of 45% for children living in families headed by single mothers.³²

One of the most important social science findings of recent years is that marriage is a wealth enhancing institution. According to one study, childrearing cohabiting couples have only about two-thirds of the income of married couples with children, mainly due to the fact that the average income of male cohabiting partners is only about half that of male married partners.³³ The selection effect is surely at work here, with less well-off men and their partners choosing cohabitation over marriage. But it also is the case that men when they marry, especially those who then go on to have children, tend to become more responsible and productive.³⁴ They earn more than their unmarried counterparts. An additional factor not to be overlooked is the private transfer of wealth among extended family members, which is considerably lower for cohabiting couples than for married couples.³⁵ It is clear that family members are more willing to transfer wealth to "in-laws" than to mere boyfriends or girlfriends.

WHO COHABITS AND WHY

Why has unmarried cohabitation become such a widespread practice throughout the modern world in such a short period of time? Demographic factors are surely involved. Puberty begins at an earlier age, as does the onset of sexual activity, and marriages take place at older ages mainly because of the longer time period spent getting educated and establishing careers. Thus there is an extended period of sexually active singlehood before first marriage. Also, our material affluence as well as welfare benefits enable many young people to live on their own for an extended time, apart from their parents. During those years of young adulthood nonmarital cohabitation can be a cost-saver, a source of companionship, and an assurance of relatively safe sexual fulfillment. For some, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for some, an alternative to it, and for yet others, simply an alternative to living alone.³⁶

More broadly, the rise of cohabitation in the advanced nations has been attributed to the sexual revolution, which has virtually revoked the stigma against cohabitation.³⁷ In the past thirty years, with the advent of effective contraceptive technologies and widespread sexual permissiveness

promoted by advertising and the organized entertainment industry, premarital sex has become widely accepted. In large segments of the population cohabitation no longer is associated with sin or social impropriety or pathology, nor are cohabiting couples subject to much, if any, disapproval.

Another important reason for cohabitation's growth is that the institution of marriage has changed dramatically, leading to an erosion of confidence in its stability. From a tradition strongly buttressed by economics, religion, and the law, marriage has become a more personalized relationship, what one wag has referred to as a mere "notarized date." People used to marry not just for love but also for family and economic considerations, and if love died during the course of a marriage, this was not considered sufficient reason to break up an established union. A divorce was legally difficult if not impossible to get, and people who divorced faced enormous social stigma.

In today's marriages love is all, and it is a love tied to self-fulfillment. Divorce is available to everyone, with little stigma attached. If either love or a sense of self-fulfillment disappear, the marriage is considered to be over and divorce is the logical outcome.

Fully aware of this new fragility of marriage, people are taking cautionary actions. The attitude is either try it out first and make sure that it will work, or try to minimize the damage of breakup by settling for a weaker form of union, one that avoids a marriage license and, if need be, an eventual divorce.

The growth of cohabitation is also associated with the rise of feminism. Traditional marriage, both in law and in practice, typically involved male leadership. For some women, cohabitation seemingly avoids the legacy of patriarchy and at the same time provides more personal autonomy and equality in the relationship. Moreover, women's shift into the labor force and their growing economic independence make marriage less necessary and, for some, less desirable. Underlying all of these trends is the broad cultural shift from a more religious society where marriage was considered the bedrock of civilization and people were imbued with a strong sense of social conformity and tradition, to a more secular society focused on individual autonomy and self invention. This cultural rejection of traditional institutional and moral authority, evident in all of the advanced, Western societies, often has had "freedom of choice" as its theme and the acceptance of "alternative lifestyles" as its message.

In general, cohabitation is a phenomenon that began among the young in the lower classes and then moved up to the middle classes.³⁸ Cohabitation in America-especially cohabitation as an alternative to marriage-is more common among Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and disadvantaged white women. One reason for this is that male income and employment are lower among minorities and the lower classes, and male economic status remains an important determinant as to whether or not a man feels ready to marry, and a woman wants to marry him.⁴⁰ Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers. Indeed, some evidence suggests that the act of cohabitation actually diminishes religious participation, whereas marriage tends to increase it.⁴¹

People who cohabit are much more likely to come from broken homes. Among young adults, those who experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood are more likely to form cohabiting unions than children who grew up in families with married parents who got along. They are also more likely to enter living-together relationships at younger ages.⁴² For young people who have already suffered the losses associated with parental divorce, cohabitation may provide an early escape from family turmoil, although unfortunately it increases the likelihood of new losses and turmoil. For these people, cohabitation often

recapitulates the childhood experience of coming together and splitting apart with the additional possibility of more violent conflict. Finally, cohabitation is a much more likely experience for those who themselves have been divorced.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST LIVING TOGETHER BEFORE MARRIAGE IN MODERN SOCIETIES?

To the degree that there is a scholarly debate about the growth of cohabitation, it is typically polarized into "for" and "against" without much concern for the nuances. On one side is the religiously inspired view that living with someone outside of marriage, indeed all premarital sex, represents an assault on the sanctity of marriage. If you are ready for sex you are ready for marriage, the argument goes, and the two should always go together, following biblical injunction. This side is typically supportive of early marriage as an antidote to sexual promiscuity, and as worthwhile in its own right.

The other side, based in secular thought, holds that we can't realistically expect people to remain sexually abstinent from today's puberty at age eleven or twelve (even earlier for some) to marriage in the late twenties, which is empirically the most desirable age for insuring a lasting union. Therefore, it is better that they cohabit during that time with a few others than be promiscuous with many. This side also finds the idea of a trial marriage quite appealing. Modern societies in any event, the argument goes, have become so highly sexualized and the practice of cohabitation has become so widely accepted that there is no way to stop it.

The anti-cohabitation perspective believes in linking sex to marriage, but fails to answer the question of how to postpone sex until marriage at a time when the age of marriage has risen to an average of almost 26, the highest in this century. Cold showers, anyone? Nor is there evidence to support the idea that marriage at a younger age is a good solution. On the contrary, marrying later in life seems to provide some protection against divorce. Teenage marriages, for example, have a much higher risk of breaking up than do marriages among young adults in their twenties. The reasons are fairly obvious; at older ages people are more emotionally mature and established in their jobs and careers, and usually better able to know what they want in a lifetime mate. Pro-cohabitation arguments recognize the demographic and social realities but fail to answer another question: if the aim is to have a strong, lifelong marriage, and for most people it still is, can cohabitation be of any help? As we have seen the statistical data are unresponsive on this point. So far, at least, living together before marriage has been remarkably unsuccessful as a generator of happy and long-lasting marriages.

SHOULD UNMARRIED COHABITATION BE INSTITUTIONALIZED?

If marriage has been moving toward decreased social and legal recognition and control, cohabitation has moved in the opposite direction, steadily gaining social and legal identification as a distinct new institution. Cohabitation was illegal in all states prior to about 1970 and, although the law is seldom enforced, it remains illegal in a number of states. No state has yet established cohabitation as a legal relationship, but most states have now decriminalized "consensual sexual acts" among adults, which include cohabitation.

In lieu of state laws, some marriage-like rights of cohabitants have gradually been established through the courts. The law typically comes into play, for example, when cohabitants who split up have disagreements about the division of property, when one of the partners argues that some kind of oral or implicit marriage-like contract existed, and when the courts accept this position. Whereas property claims by cohabitants traditionally have been denied on the ground that "parties to an illegal relationship do not have rights based on that relationship," courts have begun to rule

more frequently that cohabitators do have certain rights based on such concepts as "equitable principles."⁴³

The legal changes underway mean that cohabitation is becoming less of a "no-strings attached" phenomenon, one involving some of the benefits of marriage with none of the costly legal procedures and financial consequences of divorce. In the most famous case, *Marvin vs. Marvin*, what the news media labeled "palimony" in place of alimony was sought by a woman with whom Hollywood actor Lee Marvin lived for many years. The Supreme Court of California upheld the woman's claim of an implied contract. Many states have not accepted key elements of the *Marvin* decision, and the financial award of palimony was eventually rejected on appeal. Yet the proposition that unmarried couples have the right to form contracts has come to be widely acknowledged.

In an attempt to reduce the uncertainties of the legal system, some cohabitators are now initiating formal "living together contracts."⁴⁵ Some of these contracts state clearly, with the intent of avoiding property entanglements should the relationship break down, that the relationship is not a marriage but merely "two free and independent human beings who happen to live together." Others, in contrast, seek to secure the rights of married couples in such matters as inheritance and child custody. Marriage-like fiscal and legal benefits are also beginning to come to cohabiting couples. In the attempt to provide for gay and lesbian couples, for whom marriage is forbidden, many corporations, universities, municipalities, and even some states now provide "domestic partnership" benefits ranging from health insurance and pensions to the right to inherit the lease of a rent controlled apartment. In the process, such benefits have commonly been offered to unmarried heterosexual couples as well, one reason being to avoid lawsuits charging "illegal discrimination." Although the legal issues have only begun to be considered, the courts are likely to hold that the withholding of benefits from heterosexual cohabitators when they are offered to same-sex couples is a violation of U. S. laws against sex discrimination.

Religions have also started to reconsider cohabitation. Some religions have developed "commitment ceremonies" as an alternative to marriage ceremonies. So far these are mainly intended for same-sex couples and in some cases the elderly, but it seems only a matter of time before their purview is broadened.

Unlike in the United States, cohabitation has become an accepted new social institution in most northern European countries, and in several Scandinavian nations cohabitators have virtually the same legal rights as married couples. In Sweden and Denmark, for example, the world's cohabitation leaders, cohabitators and married couples have the same rights and obligations in taxation, welfare benefits, inheritance, and child care. Only a few differences remain, such as the right to adopt children, but even that difference may soon disappear. Not incidentally, Sweden also has the lowest marriage rate ever recorded (and one of the highest divorce rates); an estimated 30% of all couples sharing a household in Sweden today are unmarried.⁴⁶ For many Swedish and Danish couples cohabiting has become an alternative rather than a prelude to marriage, and almost all marriages in these nations are now preceded by cohabitation.

Is America moving toward the Scandinavian family model? Sweden and Denmark are the world's most secular societies, and some argue that American religiosity will work against increasing levels of cohabitation. Yet few religions prohibit cohabitation or even actively attempt to discourage it, so the religious barrier may be quite weak. Others argue that most Americans draw a sharper distinction than Scandinavians do between cohabitation and marriage, viewing marriage as a higher and more serious form of commitment. But as the practice of cohabitation in America becomes increasingly common, popular distinctions between cohabitation and

marriage are fading. In short, the legal, social and religious barriers to cohabitation are weak and likely to get weaker. Unless there is an unexpected turnaround, America and the other Anglo countries, plus the rest of northern Europe, do appear to be headed in the direction of Scandinavia.

The institutionalization of cohabitation in the public and private sectors has potentially serious social consequences that need to be carefully considered. At first glance, in a world where close relationships are in increasingly short supply, why not recognize and support such relationships in whatever form they occur? Surely this is the approach that would seem to blend social justice and compassion with the goal of personal freedom. But is it not in society's greater interest to foster long-term, committed relationships among childrearing couples? In this regard the advantages of marriage are substantial. It is only marriage that has the implicit long-term contract, the greater sharing of economic and social resources, and the better connection to the larger community.

The recognition and support of unmarried cohabitation unfortunately casts marriage as merely one of several alternative lifestyle choices. As the alternatives to it are strengthened, the institution of marriage is bound to weaken. After all, if cohabitators have the same rights and responsibilities as married couples, why bother to marry? Why bother, indeed, if society itself expresses no strong preference one way or the other. It is simpler and less complicated to live together. The expansion of domestic partner benefits to heterosexual cohabiting couples, then, may be an easy way to avoid legal challenges, but the troubling issue arises: cities and private businesses that extend these benefits are in effect subsidizing the formation of fragile family forms. Even more troublingly, they are subsidizing family forms that pose increased risks of violence to women and children. While the granting of certain marriage-like legal rights to cohabiting couples may be advisable in some circumstances to protect children and other dependents in the event of couple break up, an extensive granting of such rights serves to undercut an essential institution that is already established to regulate family relationships. These issues, at the least, should cause us to proceed toward the further institutionalization of unmarried cohabitation only after very careful deliberation and forethought.

SOME PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE THE PRACTICE OF COHABITATION BEFORE MARRIAGE

Unmarried cohabitation has become a prominent feature of modern life and is undoubtedly here to stay in some form. The demographic, economic, and cultural forces of modern life would appear to be too strong to permit any society merely to turn back the clock, even if it so desired. Yet by all of the empirical evidence at our disposal, not to mention the wisdom of the ages, the institution of marriage remains a cornerstone of a successful society. And the practice of cohabitation, far from being a friend of marriage, looks more and more like its enemy. As a goal of social change, therefore, perhaps the best that we can hope for is to contain cohabitation in ways that minimize its damage to marriage.

With that goal in mind, are there any principles that we might give to young adults to guide their thinking about living together before marriage? In developing such principles it is important to note that, because men and women differ somewhat in their sexual and mate-selection strategies, cohabitation often has a different meaning for each sex. Women tend to see it as a step toward eventual marriage, while men regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment. A woman's willingness to cohabit runs the risk of sending men precisely the wrong signal. What our grandmothers supposedly knew might well be true: If a woman truly wants a man to marry her, wisdom dictates a measure of playing hard to get.⁴⁷

Pulling together what we know from recent social science research about cohabitation and its effects, here are four principles concerning living together before marriage that seem most likely to promote, or at least not curtail, long-term committed relationships among childrearing couples:

1. Consider not living together at all before marriage. Cohabitation appears not to be helpful and may be harmful as a try-out for marriage. There is no evidence that if you decide to cohabit before marriage you will have a stronger marriage than those who don't live together, and some evidence to suggest that if you live together before marriage, you are more likely to break up after marriage. Cohabitation is probably least harmful (though not necessarily helpful) when it is prenuptial - when both partners are definitely planning to marry, have formally announced their engagement and have picked a wedding date.
2. Do not make a habit of cohabiting. Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences, both for your own sense of well-being and for your chances of establishing a strong lifelong partnership. Contrary to popular wisdom, you do not learn to have better relationships from multiple failed cohabiting relationships. In fact, multiple cohabiting is a strong predictor of the failure of future relationships.
3. Limit cohabitation to the shortest possible period of time. The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely it is that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what is required for a successful marriage.
4. Do not cohabit if children are involved. Children need and should have parents who are committed to staying together over the long term. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents and the effects of breakup can be devastating and often long lasting. Moreover, children living in cohabiting unions are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence, including lethal violence, than are children living with married parents.

CONCLUSION

Despite its widespread acceptance by the young, the remarkable growth of unmarried cohabitation in recent years does not appear to be in children's or the society's best interest. The evidence suggests that it has weakened marriage and the intact, two-parent family and thereby damaged our social well-being, especially that of women and children. We can not go back in history, but it seems time to establish some guidelines for the practice of cohabitation and to seriously question the further institutionalization of this new family form.

In place of institutionalizing cohabitation, in our opinion, we should be trying to revitalize marriage-not along classic male-dominant lines but along modern egalitarian lines. Particularly helpful in this regard would be educating young people about marriage from the early school years onward, getting them to make the wisest choices in their lifetime mates, and stressing the importance of long-term commitment to marriages. Such an educational venture could build on the fact that a huge majority of our nation's young people still express the strong desire to be in a long-term monogamous marriage.

These ideas are offered to the American public and especially to society's leaders in the spirit of generating a discussion. Our conclusions are tentative, and certainly not the last word on the subject. There is an obvious need for more research on cohabitation, and the findings of new research, of course, could alter our thinking. What is most important now, in our view, is a national debate on a topic that heretofore has been overlooked. Indeed, few issues seem more critical for the future of marriage and for generations to come.

The National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative supported by private foundations and affiliated with Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing.

The National Marriage Project has five immediate goals: (1) publish *The State of Our Unions*, an annual index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America; (2) investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage; (3) examine the popular media's portrait of marriage; (4) serve as a clearinghouse source of research and expertise on marriage; and (5) bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

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HOW THERAPY CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR MARITAL HEALTH

CMFCE CONFERENCE, JULY 3, 1999

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I take no joy in being a whistle blower, but it's time.

I am a committed marriage and family therapist, having practiced this form of therapy since 1977. I train marriage and family therapists. I believe that marriage therapy can be very helpful in the hands of therapists who committed to the profession and the practice. But there are a lot of problems out there with the practice of therapy - a lot of problems.

I used to think that the best thing we could do for couples to improve their relationship and/or solve their problems was to send them to a therapist, but since we didn't have enough therapists, then we probably need some marriage educators. It's like saying that anybody who has a concern about their heart should see a cardiologist, but there aren't enough cardiologists so they should see a primary care physician. Well, I have come to believe that this is really the reverse of how it ought to be, that people first need support people, mentors, other couples in their lives, and then they need marriage educators and then they need therapists--in that order. But the fact is that most people in this country, if they do seek help for their marriage problems, turn to a professional counselor or therapist, or a pastoral counselor.

I think that there are many problems involved with all of these groups of counselors or helpers, so my critique here will not be only about people who work with couples, because that's a small minority. Individual psychotherapists, many pastors and pastoral counselors also practice in the way that I'm going to be talking about today. In my view, there is nowhere that I know of, any category of counselor, that it's safe to send a distressed married person to for therapy. It all depends on the particular counselor or therapist, many of whom are ill-prepared to help people with their marriage problems.

You'd be interested to know that, according to a national survey, 80 percent of all private practice therapists in the United States say they do marital therapy. And only 12% of them are in a profession that requires even one course or any supervised experience. Only marriage and family therapy as a profession requires any course work or supervised clinical experience in marital or couples therapy. So most people who say they're doing this work picked it up on the side or not at all. The other thing I want to add, and as we go through this presentation today it is very important to keep in mind, is that most people who get any help from a counselor or therapist for their marital problems are seeing an individual counselor or therapist. That's where most people go. If they are depressed, anxious, or having trouble with your life, most people go to an individual psychotherapist. And that's where a lot of the damage to marriage goes on. The other aspect of the damage occurs when couples see a therapist together for marital therapy. I'm going to be telling a lot of stories here, and I want to give a caveat up front. I was not in the room to hear what the therapist said in each case, and you cannot always assume a one to one connection between what somebody reports the therapist said and what the therapist actually said. However, when you hear these stories over and over from a lot of different people, including those who are not angry at the therapist, I think we can trust the gist of what we're hearing people say that the therapist told them. And I have personally heard statements such as these from therapists in public presentations and case consultations. So, although I can't stand behind the accuracy of behind every word in the stories, I do feel I can stand behind the patterns and the trends I will describe.

Let me begin with a story of Marsha and Paul. Soon after her wedding Marsha felt something was terribly wrong with her marriage. She and her husband Paul had moved across the country following a big church wedding in their home town. Marsha was obsessed with fears that she had made a big mistake in marrying Paul. She focused on Paul's ambivalence about the Christian faith, his avoidance of personal topics of communication, and his tendency to criticize her when she expressed her worries and fears. Marsha sought help at the university student counseling center where she and Paul were graduate students. The counselor worked with her alone for a few sessions and then invited Paul in for marital therapy. Paul, who was frustrated and angry about how distant and fretful Marsha had become, was a reluctant participant in the counseling.

In addition to the marital problems, Marsha was suffering from clinical depression: she couldn't sleep or concentrate, she felt sad all the time, and she felt like a failure. Medication began to relieve some of these symptoms, but she was still upset about the state of her marriage. After a highly charged session with this distressed wife and angry, reluctant husband, the counselor met with Marsha separately the next week. She told Marsha that she would not recover fully from her depression until she started to "trust her feelings" about the marriage. Following is how Marsha later recounted the conversation with the counselor:

Marsha: "What do you mean, trust my feelings?"

Counselor: "You know you are not happy in your marriage."

Marsha: "Yes, that's true."

Counselor: "Perhaps that you need a separation in order to figure out whether you really want this marriage."

Marsha: "But I love Paul and I am committed to him."

Counselor: "The choice is yours, but I doubt that you will begin to feel better until you start to trust your feelings and pay attention to your unhappiness."

Marsha: "Are you saying I should get a divorce?"

Counselor: "I'm just urging you to trust your feelings of unhappiness, and maybe a separation would help you sort things out."

A stunned Marsha decided to not return to that counselor, a decision the counselor no doubt perceived as reflecting Marsha's unwillingness to take responsibility for her own happiness. It gets worse: Marsha talked to her priest during this crisis. The priest urged her to wait to see if her depression was causing the marital problem or if the marital problem was causing the depression--a prudent bit of advice. But a few minutes later, the priest said that, if it turned out that the marital problems were causing the depression, he would help Marsha get an annulment. Marsha was even more stunned than she had been by the therapist. The rest of the story is that they did find a good marital therapist who helped them straighten out their marriage, Marsha's depression lifted, and they are currently doing well. They survived two efforts at what I call "therapist-induced marital suicide."

Now Paul was a very nice guy. But he was young for his age and he didn't know much about feelings. I didn't know about feelings at his age either, and he was just really befuddled that his new bride was depressed all the time. I had been to their wedding six months before this and was appalled at this turn of events in therapy. How did we get here? It's not that therapists or pastoral counselors are out to hurt people and deliberately undermine marriage.

I want to give you my version of a cultural overview, to put this problem in perspective. It was in the 1950s that people really began to pay attention for the first time, in a systematic way, to marital problems. The field of marriage counseling got started then. As we look back at the 1950s from a current perspective we see a focus on traditional marriage, with traditional gender roles, a reluctance to allow women to be in the workforce. We see divorce being viewed as a personal failing. If you remember in those days a woman was a divorcée her entire life. If she was in an auto accident, the newspaper headline said "Divorcée in Auto Accident." A tremendous amount of social stigma was attached to divorce. Therapists often saw divorce as a treatment failure, based on personality problems of an individual. As we look back we often see that the therapist supported certain gender arrangements that society revisited later on. And in the 1950s most people who were doing any work in the marriage area were oblivious to marital violence; it was only in the 70s we began to pay attention to that problem.

So, what we do in our country is, of course, swing from one kind of model to another. When the 60s and 70s came along, we had the rise of the culture of individualism, of marriage based not on duty anymore, but on personal happiness. The dark side of marriage now became apparent as we began to understand the amount of abuse that went on. The divorce rate skyrocketed, the no-fault divorce laws began to be passed in the early 1970s, and we had the cultural revolution in which we were liberating individuals from the traditional strictures of conventional morality. Therapists took two stances towards marriage during this era. The first stance was "neutrality" on the subject of marital commitment. In a short time therapists moved from an era in which a prominent psychiatrist in the 1950s said that he never supported a couple's decision to get a divorce, to an era where the therapist was supposed to be neutral. A recent survey of clinical members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy found that nearly two-thirds said that they are "neutral" on the subject and marriage and divorce. As a colleague said this in the press just a few years ago, "The good marriage, the good divorce, it matters not." This was where neutrality has led us.

The other stance emerging during the 1970's was beyond neutrality (because neutrality is not really possible anyway), to therapists seeing themselves as liberationists to help people out of unhappy marriages and other commitments in their lives. So we had the introduction of the idea of liberation from marriage, particularly when somebody sees an individual therapist. If you describe your marriage as painful for you, the therapist wants to liberate you from this toxic influence. This stance is still with us. If someone raises a concern about the fate of their children, many of us were trained to say that kids will do fine if their parents do what they need to do for themselves. What nonsense, but I used to say it.

The 1980s through the mid 1990s were a time when I believe that market values--- the values of the marketplace--triumphed in American culture. Consumerism prevailed. If the 70s were the "I gotta take care of my own psychological needs" decade, the 1980s added the element of material greed. The business model invaded everywhere. I'm not against the business model in business, but look how it has invaded the professions with managed health care. And I believe that the business model, the market model, has also invaded the family and marriage in a very big way. We have less loyalty now, in all spheres of life, then we did 20 or 30 years ago. Employers are less loyal to their employees, employees are less loyal to their employers. People are less loyal to their particular church or faith community; they shop around for the best show, the best services. In a generation we have moved rapidly from being citizens to being primarily consumers. Can you imagine any politician now saying, without people laughing at him or her, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country?" Give me a break. It would not be believed. We moved from that to Ronald Reagan asking, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"

So we are now primarily customers. And customers are inherently disloyal. Marriage, I believe, has been strongly influenced by this combination of the individual fulfillment culture and the consumer culture. Marriage is becoming yet another consumer lifestyle. The traditional marriage vows in some parts of the country are changed to "as long as we both shall love," instead of "as long as we both shall live." I think people now are beginning to see themselves as "leasing" a marriage. A counselor who works in the military told me that a number of young adults that she counsels tell her that, if they're not sure whether they should get married, "if it doesn't work out, we can always get a divorce." That's like saying, "I'm not sure if this car will last long, so I'll lease," and then if it falls apart, it's somebody else's problem. I invite you to consider the influence of the consumer culture on the culture of marriage.

An example: Levi's jeans is attempting to make a comeback after losing its trendiness. If you lose your trendiness in the consumer culture, you're dead. Levi's has an ad, a lavish ad across six magazine pages, featuring the ups and downs of dating couples whose relationships don't last very long. The final page shows two female roommates, one consoling the other about a recent breakup. Just behind the two roommates, on the kitchen wall, is an art poster in Spanish that says, "My parents divorced." The caption underneath the ad contains the take home message from Levi's. "At least some things last forever--Levi's. They go on." You have to look at marketers to see what's happening in the culture.

Another example: A New York Times journalist reported being at a wedding and hearing a woman at the wedding reception (apparently she was a relative of the groom) say in a loud voice about the bride: "She will make a nice first wife for Brian." (Laughter.) You laugh, but is it not a pained laugh? Could you imagine if this was your daughter? This is like a first job, or a first house. When our daughter moved into a grubby basement apartment, with bugs, but one that she could afford, we said "It'll make a nice first apartment." Or, maybe we say "a nice first girlfriend," when our son is a teenager--but a nice first wife?

Now therapists, like all of us, are far more absorbed in the culture than we are observing of the culture. Most of us like to think we're counter cultural, but we're not-- we're just swimming along in the mainstream. So I began to pay attention to the language I am hearing from therapists and in the self-help books that therapists write. This is the language that I hear from therapists now, in places like case consultation groups.

- "The marriage wasn't working anymore." This is saying your car not working anymore, and is it worth it after a period of time to put more money into repairs? If it's not working, get another one.
- "It was time to move on." That's what we say about a job. I invested in the job, I've lost my creative edge, and it's time to move on.
- "You deserve better." This is a very consumerist saying, and friends, not just therapists, will say this to each other about a marriage. You complain about your marriage and your friend or your therapist says, "You deserve better." That is a market-driven attitude. You put all this money into this vehicle, you deserve better.
- One well-known therapist, and social scientist, refers to "starter marriage." Starter marriage? Now when you hear the word "starter" what do you think of... a starter home. A starter home ? a little home that you plan to leave. So you have a starter marriage.

I'm suggesting that this kind of language represents the invasion of a market, consumerist ethic into marriage, on top of the messages about individual fulfillment and satisfaction. This a powerful combination. I'm also saying that as therapists and marriage educators, if we do not counter this culture, we're not going to have any influence at all. Which is why the 1990s version of marriage education has to be based on moral principles about commitment, not just based on ideas about just enriching your marriage. That's where we were in the 70s, that we could enrich and improve our marriages, and that's helpful, but it's got to be based on moral notions now. Or it's not going to withstand the notion that we move on to something else that's even more enriching than our current marriage. Or if your marriage is not enrichable, then get out.

Here are some of my values about marriage and divorce. I do not believe we can or should go back to the 1950s or before. I believe that some divorces are necessary. And all major religions recognize that some people cannot live together. Not all religions say that you can get a divorce

and remarry, but every major religion knows that some relationships break down. And that it is unwise for some people to continue to live together. Some marriages are dead on arrival at the therapist's office. Some people just drop their spouse off at the therapist's office and head out the door. I think divorce is a necessary safety valve for terminally ill marriages. I have a friend who discovered her husband and coparent was a pedophile, and he would not get help. The moral thing to do was to send him packing. So as much as I'm going to be talking about what we can do to save marriages, I think it's important to understand that there is a dark, tragic side to marriage. But divorce ought to be the tragic exception, not the norm.

I view divorce as being like an amputation to be avoided if at all possible because it brings about permanent disability. But sometimes, an amputation is necessary. I also believe, and I think this is very important to say in response to critics of this movement (and I think that most of you, or all of you I hope, would agree with this): We can reduce the divorce rate substantially, without increasing the number of truly miserable conflicted marriages. I would not be thrilled if we reduced the divorce rate by one third and increased by one third the rate of truly miserable, highly conflicted couples. We can do both, we can reduce the divorce rate, and we can increase the percentage of people who are working out their marriages. We have to do both. This is not just a divorce prevention movement. Are you with me on this? (Applause.) I think both are important to say. And we need more data like the Australian and New Jersey studies that found that over 40% of divorced people regretted their divorce and thought it was preventable. We need to get that kind of data out.

Having stated my own values, my critique focuses on the unnecessary pain and unnecessary divorce created by incompetent therapists and by therapists who have hyper-individualistic approaches to marriage. In this view of marriage, marriage is a venue for personal fulfillment stripped of ethical obligations. And divorce is a strictly private, self-interested choice, with no important stakeholders other than the individual adult client. The result is, in my opinion, is that it is dangerous in America today, to talk about your marriage problems with a therapist. You don't know what their attitude is. (Applause.) I don't have any research on this, but I believe you may have a better than even chance of having your marriage harmed.

Now I'm going to talk about the most common ways that therapists undermine marital commitment. And I want to underline again: I do this for a living. I train therapists, and I think that therapy can be enormously helpful in the right hands. There are four ways that therapists undermine marital commitment: incompetent therapists, neutral therapists, pathologizing therapists, and overtly undermining therapists.

First, incompetent therapists. The biggest problem I see in this area is that most therapists are not trained to work with couples, and they see working with couples as an extension of individual psychotherapy. It is not. In individual therapy, depending on your model, you can be fairly laid back. You can be empathic and clarifying, you can even be fairly passive if you want. People will tell their story, they will feel heard, they will be helped to think through their concerns and their options. If you take that approach in marital therapy, you will fail. If you have a warring couple in your office, and you do not create a structure for that session, they will overwhelm you. They will repeat in the office that which they do at home. A lot of therapists end a stormy session with, "Well, we've clarified some of the issues, haven't we?" (Laughter.) Which means they've put in psychological terms the stuff that the couple knew they were doing. Um, thank you for the clarification that we are at war with each other. And these therapists offer no direction, no

structure, no guidelines--under the pretense that this is being helpful. This may be helpful to some individuals in therapy, but it is not helpful to couples.

Another thing that incompetent therapists do is to beat up on one of the partners. Although women sometimes get more than their fair of the therapist's negative attention, an under-recognized problem is that men also get seriously disadvantaged in some couples therapy. Men often come to save their marriage, not primarily to seek insight into themselves. The light bulbs have gone on: I could lose this woman, I could lose these children. I gotta shape up. When they come to a therapist who is only used to dealing with individuals, they are in trouble. The therapist begins with "And how do you feel about being here, Joe?" And Joe says "Well, I'm just here to save my marriage." "No, Joe, that's not a feeling." "Well, I think it's important that we..." "No, no, that's a thought, Joe, that's not a feeling." And so Joe is not a candidate for individual psychotherapy, which to the therapist means "he's got big time problems." The therapist and the wife decide that both she and he need a lot of individual help. And so you try to trot him off to an individual therapist, her to an individual therapist. He doesn't go, because he's there to save his marriage, not to understand his psyche--which proves that he is not serious about change. Another time that therapists turf couples off to individual therapists is when the therapist can't handle the in-session conflict. The therapist can't handle the hot conflict, feels overwhelmed by it. This work is not easy. Jay Haley, one of the founders of family therapy, says that marital therapy is the most difficult form of therapy. The pulls, the triangles, the hot conflict that is right in the room makes it very difficult. The problem isn't that some therapists can't handle it, the problem is they don't know they can't handle it, and they assume that there is a lot of individual pathology going on. So they turf the spouses off to their individual therapists, or keeps one of the spouses in individual therapy and sends the other to a colleagues. I have seen a lot of unnecessary divorces because of this scenario. The wife can lose out in this scenario if she is to say that she has "issues." She'll say that she's depressed a lot, that she's read a lot of self help books and knows she is co-dependent or something worse. So the therapist and the husband become co-therapists to help her with her problems. And it goes nowhere. The first problem in marital therapy, then, is incompetence, and therapists not knowing they're not competent.

Second, neutral therapists. In the 1970s and 1980s, I was a neutral therapist on marriage and divorce. I helped people do a cost-benefit analysis--what does the individual gain and lose by staying married or getting divorced. This consumerist cost-benefit analysis disguises itself as neutral. The questions "What do you need to do for you?" and "What's in it for you to stay, what's in it for you to not stay?" are not neutral because they focus only what the individual sees as his or her own personal gain or loss. Neutrality when somebody has previously promised before their community, before their God, to be married to somebody until death do them part--neutrality on whether somebody can fulfill that commitment--is an undermining stance. It is not a neutral stance. And it often sides with the more self-oriented spouse. When somebody is seriously considering getting out of a marriage, listen to their language. They are often using the language of individual self-interest, not the language of moral commitment. You know, "I have needs"; "I have a right to happiness." That's the language. If the therapist's language is the same, now you have an alliance between the reluctant, distancing spouse and the therapist, a collusion it undermines the marital relationship in ways that they therapist does not recognize.

An alternative to neutrality is that, except where there's abuse and danger, to let the couple know that I will try to support the possibility that they can salvage their marriage. I am an advocate for their marriage. They can call me off but they're going to have to look me in the eye and call me

off. I'm going to try to support the possibility they can work this out, knowing that they must want it and that it is not always possible.

Third, therapists who pathologize. This is really an insidious one. You go to individual therapy, you criticize your spouse, and your therapist is likely to come up with a diagnosis for your spouse. I'm afraid you're married to a narcissistic personality disorder. When you get a therapist giving you labels to pathologize your partner, it leads to hopelessness. Sometimes the therapist pathologizes the reason you got married. For any marriage in this room, we can get together and figure out what pathology led you to get married. This can lead to a sense of fatalism and hopelessness. You should never have bought that car to begin with.

Another version is pathologizing the current relationship, telling the couple that they have no assets, that this is a sick relationship, that you are of questionable psychological health if you stay. Let's say you see an individual therapist after your spouse has an affair, and you're thinking of taking your spouse back, you can be pathologized for your very commitment to keep trying. What's wrong with you that you are hanging in there? The therapist can highlight a one-sided sense of victimization. Now there is a lot of marital abuse out there, genuine abuse, but this word gets thrown around a lot. You can take ordinary unhappiness and conflict and transform them into the sense of being abused. You are a victim, and this then propels you out. A new form of pathology, by the way, is clients saying that they're "bored" in their marriages. I've seen therapists get very exercised about how awful it would be to be in a boring marriage. In a consumer culture, when we want stimulation and satisfaction all the time, boring is the new pathology.

Fourth, overt undermining. The most common form is provocative questions and challenges. "If you are not happy, why do you stay?" is a directly undermining question. It says "You are an idiot if you stay." I have a student who had post-partum depressions after both of her children. She went to counselors to get help, in the process complaining about her husband for being insensitive to her emotional distress but not saying that she was doubting her commitment. Each time, at the end of the first session, the therapist said some version of this statement: "I can't believe you're still married." This is an assertion of the therapist's belief that the couple are fundamentally incompatible and that an intelligent client should run, not walk, out of the marriage. You'd be amazed at how many therapists say this kind of thing after a session or two. What they're really saying is that the that couple are fundamentally incompatible but that "I am fundamentally unable to help you." (Laughter.) That's what that means. And this plays to the distancing spouse.

Then there is undermining by direct advice. It's against the code of ethics of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy to directly tell people what they should do, either to stay married or divorced, but a lot of therapists do it. They have a different code of ethics. They say, "I think you should break up," "I think you may need a separation," or "For your own health you need to move out." In one case, a woman with a husband and ten children relapsed from her alcoholism. Her individual therapist admitted telling her that she needed to move out and have no contact with her husband or kids, for the sake of her recovery. The family therapist I talked was trying to pick up the pieces with the husband and children.

Now let me show you a video from a public television series, Frontline. It was an exposé of abuses in therapy, and I've pulled out an excerpt on marriage. You'll see Pat, one of the therapists, describe her approach to helping individuals who have marriage problems detach from their marriage. Then you'll see one of her clients, followed by comments from a second

therapist also named Pat. These therapists encourage cutoffs from family of origin, and also from spouses. This is a fringe group of therapists, but what you're going to hear represents an element of mainstream psychotherapy carried to its logical conclusion of undermining marital commitment.

Frontline Tape.

Scary? Very scary. This group was shut down after this expose came out, but they are back in operation, I am told. But the language that you heard is out prevalent in the world of therapy.

What can be done to make therapy less hazardous to marriages?

1. We need a consumer awareness movement about the risks of sharing marriage problems with a therapist or counselor. Caveat emptor.

2. Licensing boards and professional associations should have training requirements for therapists who claim to practice marital therapy.

3. People considering therapy should learn to ask questions to learn about the therapist's training and value orientation. They can ask a therapist on the phone or in the first session the following kinds of questions:

- "Can you describe your background and training in marital therapy?" If the therapist is self-taught or workshop-trained, and can't point to a significant education in this work, then consider going elsewhere.
- "What is your attitude toward salvaging a trouble marriage versus helping couples break up?" If the therapist says he or she is "neutral," or "I don't try to save marriage, I try to help people" look elsewhere. (I'd also run if the therapist says he or she does not believe in divorce.)
- "What is your approach when one partner is seriously considering ending the marriage and the other wants to save it?" If the therapist responds by focusing only on helping each person clarify their personal feelings and decisions, consider looking elsewhere.
- "What percentage of your practice is marital therapy?" Avoid therapists who mostly do individual therapy.
- "Of the couples you treat, what percentage would you say work out enough of their problems to stay married with a reasonable amount of satisfaction with the relationship." "What percentage break up while they are seeing you?" "What percentage do not improve?" "What do you think makes the differences in these results?" If someone says "100%" stay together, I would be concerned, and if they say that staying together is not a measure of success for them, I'd be concerned.

Let me say a few things in conclusion. In the late 90s the cultural tide is shifting. We're shifting towards what I believe a better balance between individual satisfaction and moral commitment, and towards the creation of new opportunities for people to learn how to have lifelong, successful marriages. But I believe that most therapists are still behind the times. Like generals, they are still fighting the last war. The one that freed individuals to leave unhappy marriages. They still see themselves as liberation fighters, for individual fulfillment against oppressive moral codes and family structures. That's how I started my career as a therapist. But in the meantime the culture has shifted. The old war has been largely won. Most of us are now free to walk away from our marital commitments more easily than from any other contract in our lives.

We can always get a divorce. And we suffer relatively social stigma for doing so. But now we face the prospect of losing our ability to sustain any commitment at all. We have cut through our marital chains but ended up with Velcro. Easy to pull apart, but not strong enough to hold us together under pressure.

Speaking of pressure, I think of long-term marriage like I think about living in Minnesota, in Lake Wobegon, perhaps. You move into marriage in the springtime of hope, but eventually arrive at the Minnesota winter with its cold and darkness. Many of us are tempted to give up and move south at this point. We go to a therapist for help. Some therapists don't know how to help us cope with winter, and we get frostbite in their care. Other therapists tell us that we are being personally victimized by winter, that we deserve better, that winter will never end, and that if we are true to ourselves we will leave our marriage and head south. The problem of course is that our next marriage will enter its own winter at some point. Do we just keep moving on, or do we make our stand now--with this person, in this season? That's the moral, existential question. A good therapist, a brave therapist, will help us to cling together as a couple, warming each other against the cold of winter, and to seek out whatever sunlight is still available while we wrestle with our pain and disillusionment. A good therapist, a brave therapist will be the last one in the room to give up on our marriage, not the first one, knowing that the next springtime in Minnesota is all the more glorious for the winter that we endured together. Thank you.

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**The Emerging Field of Marriage Education:
Creating Smart Marriages for the Millennium (Teaching Couples How to Fish)
Diane Sollee, founder and director, Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education
June, 1997 (revised October, 2000)**

There is a new sense of concern about divorce and family breakdown. Most of us have come to recognize the connections between family breakdown and our most disturbing and intractable problems including delinquency, poverty, violence, school failure, reduced worker productivity, depression, substance abuse, and poor health. And most of us are ready to agree that it would be a good idea to give marriages our attention and support. However, despite this urgency and consensus, there is confusion about what *can* and *should* be done.

There are proposals all across the country to tighten divorce laws -- yet critics warn that this will simply resurrect sleazy divorce practices and/or trap women and children in violent, conflicted marriages. There are proposals to make premarital counseling mandatory -- but critics point out that premarital counseling has been around for decades without reducing the divorce rate and that mandated counseling would be an infringement of our rights and privacy.

There are proposals to increase access to marital therapy yet there are those who point out that in spite of dramatic increases over the past twenty years in the numbers of marital therapists and counselors the divorce rate hasn't budged -- it's stayed at 50% for more than twenty years. They argue that few are helped by such counseling even when it is available because marital counseling and therapy are simply too little, too late. And it's true that few who divorce ever see

a counselor or therapist. People facing divorce say, "I'm not crazy, I just don't love you anymore." As they see it, therapy is not what's called for. It's a crap shoot -- they were in the unlucky 50%, love died and they feel it is their right to move on and find someone new. It is this widespread acceptance of the inevitability of divorce that directs the majority of our resources towards management of the divorce process and its aftermath. The Family Therapy Networker (May/June 1997) in "New Markets for Therapists" points to therapists who have "significantly increased their incomes, while avoiding the managed care squeeze" by recognizing one of the two fastest growing segments of our society -- divorced couples - and redesigning their practice to meet their needs. Divorce, it points out, takes on an adversarial life of its own, breeding antagonism and running-up financial and emotional costs. Therapists are urged to capture this market and work on divorce adjustment. Nothing is mentioned about preventing divorce -- just mopping up the lifetime of mess. As in physical health care, it's time to shift our emphasis from crisis intervention and rehabilitation to prevention.

In January, 1996, in the midst of the new concern and the growing confusion about what might be done, the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) was founded. CMFCE believes that the solution is at hand -- in fact right under our noses -- in the form of a new approach called "marriage education" -- that the real challenge is one of connecting the solution to the problem -- getting the new information about what makes marriages work to couples in a timely, user-friendly, cost-efficient manner.

The CMFCE believes that the country is ready for this preventive, couple-empowering approach. That we are all aware of the desirability of prevention and are ready to change behaviors that cause problems rather than trying to patch what's been irreparably broken. The public has demonstrated that it can and will stop smoking, buckle up, exercise, and lay infants on their backs rather than face down. Tell us, show us, teach us -- and we are likely to do it, especially if we are invested in the outcome.

And we are invested. Ninety percent of us still marry -- and remarry -- despite the terrible odds. All the surveys report that we believe that having a happy marriage and family life is the number one prerequisite to our own personal happiness. All that's needed is a way to help couples achieve their own most cherished goal.

The Marriage Education approach is based on years of clinical experience and research into what distinguishes the marriages that succeed. It's not, it turns out that successful couples have fewer differences -- less to fight about. In fact couples who stay married and happy have the same level of disagreements as those that divorce. Couples also disagree about all the same basic issues. It's about how they handle their differences. And about what they do when they are "between differences." It's about behaviors - or best practices. And most exciting is the discovery that these behaviors have been identified and can be easily, efficiently, and economically taught. Couples can be taught to do more of what makes marriages successful and less of what predicts marital unhappiness and divorce. Marriage Education courses provide an operator's manual for this skill-based proposition called marriage.

The CMFCE convened over 100 experts in Washington, DC May, 1997 for the nation's first annual marriage education conference. The conference demonstrated that there are a whole range of programs -- with research, models, and delivery systems -- ready for widespread implementation in churches, high schools, and extension offices, on military bases, in health care settings and court systems, and down at the fire hall. And it demonstrated that the helping professionals are eager to be trained in these new approaches.

The dozens of marriage education courses listed in the CMFCE on-line Directory:

- o Can be taught by para-professionals, lay leaders, teachers, clergy -- or mental health professionals.
- o Leader training takes one to three days.
- o Teaching is most effective in classrooms - couples learn the skills better, or at least as well, in groups than in the more expensive, labor intensive one-trainer/counselor-to-one-couple model.
- o Are not therapy or counseling - couples don't share personal issues or feelings in the classroom.
- o Skills work with premarital couples, newlyweds, and long-married and/or troubled couples.
- o Normalize conflicts and differences as part of marriage and as part of a loving relationship
- o Include some form of basic communication skills: speaker- listener, time outs, shared meaning, conflict-resolution, problem solving, empathy-building, softened start-up, love maps, etc.
- o Eight to 20 hours long -- usually taught in a weekend or one-night-a-week format.
- o Skills, once learned, are modeled at home and thus reduce divorce in future generations.
- o Skills also generalize to relationships with co-workers, neighbors, peers, in-laws, etc.
- o Assume men and women are equally capable of learning the skills and are equally invested in having a satisfying, successful marriage.
- o Effective across classes and cultures.
- o Easily adapted for special populations - stepfamilies, first-time parents, couples facing long separations, heart-attack-recovery, etc.

THE PROGRAMS

Programs fall into several overlapping categories determined in part by the setting in which they evolved -- in university, clinical, church or community settings. However, whatever the setting, each program was developed by professionals, clergy or lay leaders who were determined to find a better way -- weary of pulling couples from the river -- discouraged at how few they could resuscitate -- these innovators moved upstream to learn how to keep couples from falling in -- and taking their children down with them.

Distinctions continue to blur as the field evolves -- as programs share information, as trainees disperse across the country, and as new programs spring-up -- rich blends of the originals informed by ongoing research and innovations, with applications designed for special populations or settings. The following outline is not exhaustive, but is intended as an overview and introduction to the range of available programs.

UNIVERSITY-DEVELOPED PROGRAMS: Universities provide a fertile environment with built-in supports for research and development. These programs created over the past thirty years, were based on various combinations of research, clinical theory, clinical experience, and learning theory. Each boasts an impressive body of outcome-effectiveness research, training manuals, audio and videotape packages, books, applications and spin-off programs, and a network of students/leaders trained in the approach. Each, in a brief, one-day to a 20-some hour format, emphasizes the teaching of a form of speaker-listener/communication/problem-solving skills and each also includes skills for increasing empathy, understanding, affection, appreciation, commitment, and/or enjoyment in the relationship. Each is based on the premise that if couples can communicate, know their partner, set goals, and handle conflict and differences effectively, love and satisfaction are likely to follow - that success breeds satisfaction with each other and with the marriage. Each program uses a didactic lecture format to impart

information and demonstrate skills and each includes couples exercises and practice sessions with optional levels of coaching.

These three are recognized exemplars each with twenty years or more of clinical trials, refinements and research:

- o **Relationship Enhancement, RE**, Bernard Guerney, Jr; PhD, Pennsylvania State University.
- o **Couple Communication, CC**, Sherod Miller, PhD, University of Minnesota.
- o **The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, PREP**: Howard Markman, PhD, and Scott Stanley, PhD, University of Denver.

Although there are distinctions to be made among them, what is significant are their similarities and their demonstrated effectiveness; their widespread application in different community and cultural settings; the fact that they work in the cost-efficient, large classroom format; are protective of each individual and each couple's privacy; their recognition by their professional communities; and their training programs for course leaders -- lay and para-professional, clergy, and mental health professionals -- in one to three days.

There are other university-derived programs, also research-based and which use the same didactic/classroom format to teach skills, but which lack a training program for trainers, a wide network of practitioners, or applications beyond the classes which are taught by the founders at their home base/research setting. These include:

- o **The Marriage Survival Kit**, introduced in 1996 by John Gottman, PhD, University of Washington, whose twenty-five years of marital research undergirds much of the theory of the marriage education field. He teaches the course twice a year in Seattle but is currently focused on follow-up research including booster sessions and relapse-prevention and is not yet training trainers.
- o **We Can Work It Out**, Clifford Notarius, PhD, Catholic University of America, similar to PREP & RE in that skills are taught in a group lecture format interspersed with couples practice sessions but with a one-trainer-to-one-couple ratio for the practice/coaching segments, and, thus, less cost-efficient. Currently under revision.

Another, long-established university-based program, is unique in that it uses a series of audio tapes and a highly structured leader manual and does away with the need for leader training.

- o **Training in Marriage Enrichment, TIME**, Don Dinkmeyer, PhD, and Jon Carlson, PhD "Anyone with group facilitation skills can present the course -- mental health, marriage counselor, clergy or leader training is not a requirement -- the kit provides the information needed about marriages and skills," says Carlson. The \$150 leader kit contains step-by-step instructions for teaching ten two-hour, skill-building couples groups. Dinkmeyer and Carlson based the program on their successful parent education program and on the requests for a similar kit for couples education.

INVENTORY-BASED/UNIVERSITY-DEVELOPED PROGRAMS: Uses question/answer format to uncover areas of disagreement and assess areas of couple strength and weakness with premarital or already-married couples. The inventories predict marital success with up to 86% accuracy through identification of the couples' skill-level - how often they use the silent treatment, whether little issues often escalate into serious fights, etc. Leader training takes one day. Each has various scoring options and prices which equip the counselor with a report which identifies couple strengths (skills) and areas of weakness. Each has a variety of inventories adapted specifically to premarital, marital, cohabiting, retired, remarriage couples.

o **PREPARE/ENRICH**, David Olson, PhD, University of Minnesota. Results are reviewed in several sessions with the couple and counselor and/or in a new format, "Growing Together" -- a skill-teaching, six-session, couples group. Offices in ten countries.

o **FOCCUS/REFOCCUS**, Barbara Markey, PhD, Creighton University. Used extensively in Catholic settings but applicable to all denominations as well as secular settings. Includes special applications for cohabiting, remarriage, interfaith, and dual career couples and unique scoring options.

o **RELATE** - developed by the Marriage Study consortium, a non-profit, research and educational organization, directed by Thomas Holman, PhD. Scoring options and applications.

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS: Utilizes the heretofore untapped natural resources in the congregation/community -- well-married, volunteer, mentor couples. The programs recruit and train these couples to work with engaged and newlywed couples, as well as couples facing special challenges using some combination of inventory-based and skill-training programs. Special challenges might include stepfamily couples or those "on the brink" due to affairs, gambling, the death of a child, chronic illness, unemployment, etc. The premise is that stepfamily couples can best mentor to stepfamilies and "survivor" couples can best help those facing crisis.

These programs hold churches and synagogues, congregations and communities, responsible for supporting and helping to maintain marriages in their sphere. They are challenged to prepare couples for lifelong marriage rather than for a wedding day. This bodes well for success because 75% of couples choose to be married in a church or synagogue. In a noted "boomerang" effect mentor couples find their marriages strengthened and the perspective of the congregation/community -- and the newlyweds -- is dramatically changed to one of a "marriage culture."

The following programs have developed training curricula, videos, workbooks, newsletters, etc:

o **Marriage Savers Churches & Community Marriage Policies(CMP)** - developed by Mike McManus. The Marriage Saver Church program utilizes the FOCCUS/REFOCCUS inventory, mentor couples, and teaches conflict-resolution skills. Community Marriage Policies invite clergy of all denominations in a city to sign a covenant that requires an agreed-upon course of marital preparation. More than 110 cities have signed a Community Marriage Policy.

o **Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS)** - This secular, non-denominational program developed by Les and Leslie Parrott, PhDs, utilizes a Marriage Mentor approach. Engaged couples attend a skill-building marriage preparation weekend, and are then matched with a volunteer couple who mentors them through the first year of marriage -- the year which sees a high rate of breakup and which sets patterns for the rest of the marriage. The total fee is \$100 per couple for the marriage preparation week-end retreat, the year-long mentoring program, and materials.

o **Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter & Retrouvaille. Marriage or Engaged Encounter** couples week-end enrichment retreats, begun by Catholic Church in 1960s, are run by trained lay volunteer couples and clergy using an outline that guides a couples dialogue and the private sharing of topic letters, feelings, recommitment, and renewal. Retrouvaille ("rediscovery") is a parallel program developed for seriously troubled, on-the-brink couples facing issues such as infidelity, gambling, and alcoholism. Fee is by donation based on what couples can afford.

o Caring Couples Network - This program, developed by Richard Hunt, PhD, and the United Methodist Church, trains teams of mentor couples, clergy, and professional consultants to provide services to couples and families.

o Marriage Enrichment - Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME)

Founded in 1973 by David & Vera Mace, this non-sectarian, non-profit, membership organization for couples operates across the US and Canada sponsoring local, national and regional chapters, conferences, and retreats and trains and certifies leader couples to teach and demonstrate skills to help couples work on their marriages for a lifetime. Annual couples dues are \$30. Couples meet in ongoing chapters - usually in member's homes - to share resources for marriage enrichment and to provide lectures and seminars in the community. Members receive a bi-monthly newsletter, and attend national and regional conferences. .

THERAPY-BASED PROGRAMS: These grew out of clinical practice and combine therapy theory and interventions (bonding, catharsis, anger expression, family-of-origin work, reimagining, healing, etc.) with the core communication/conflict-resolution skills. Course leaders must be licensed mental health professionals. In two major models, PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills), developed by Lori Gordon, PhD, and IMAGO ("image/mirror,") developed by Harville Hendrix,

PhD, the training of trainers is longer (20 days), and the programs more intensive. (Update: In 1998, PAIRS revised its format. In order to bring the skill training component to more couples, it no longer requires a mental health license or degree, and offers a four-day training for its short courses. Such license and certification is now only required to teach the 120 hour version of the course which includes bonding and catharsis work. In 2001, IMAGO created a new IMAGO Education program with a two-day training for lay educators and clergy.)

PAIRS. The original 120 hour PAIRS course taught over 4 months, offers a wider range of experiential exercises and skills - ventilation, sensuality, role-play, bonding - and includes group interaction and the expectation that the four-month curriculum will anchor the new behaviors and understandings. PAIRS also has a range of shorter courses - 4 hour, one-day, week-end, and an eight-week PAIRS FIRST marriage preparation program as well as PAIRS for PEERS, a program for high schools and colleges.

IMAGO defines the purpose of marriage as the healing by the partners of each other's childhood wounds and offers a tool-kit of skills which partners use to do this work -- the major tool being the Couple Dialogue. This might be done in the intensive IMAGO couples week-end workshop OR in a longer course of Imago Relationship Therapy, one-on-one with an Imago therapist for 10 to 12 sessions, in which the couple is expected to do the major portion of the work through the dialogue process and thus will be able to handle problems on their own following the "training." (See above for new IMAGO ED program.)

[\(click for a directory of marriage education programs\)](#)

SCHOOL PROGRAMS: Adapts the skills-based programs for couples for delivery at the earliest age - primarily in high school and middle school, but interesting programs are also underdevelopment for elementary schools. These programs find that high school and middle

school students can learn the skills, understand the research, and learn what it takes to maintain a skillful relationship. The premise is that this will equip them to make better marital choices and to make their marriages successful. The programs have developed curricula, manuals, and videos and each is being taught in schools across the US. In 1997 the Oklahoma Bar Association committed to providing two programs -- CONNECTIONS and PARTNERS -- to all 11th and 12th graders in the state. In May, 1998 Florida passed the country's first marriage education bill, providing marriage skill-training for all 9th and 10th graders.

Building Relationships: developed by David Olson, PhD, this is an inventory and skill-training curriculum to teach high school seniors and college students what it takes to maintain a healthy marriage.

PARTNERS: development and implementation sponsored by the ABA Family Law Division and in place in the high schools in 35 states. This adaptation of the PAIRS (Lori Gordon) program was spearheaded by Lynne Gold-Bikin, JD. Divorce lawyers purchase the video-based course for a high school in their region and participate with teachers and mental health professionals in presenting the course.

PAIRS for PEERS: Lori Gordon's adaptation of the PAIRS program for middle school, high school, and college.

CONNECTIONS: Relationships & Marriage -- developed by The Dibble Fund, the curriculum was designed by Charlene Kamper, MA, an experienced high school teacher for teacher-friendly, ready-to-use, manual-guided, step-by-step presentation by high school teachers to help teenagers learn relationship skills.

EQ: Enhancing Social-Emotional Intelligence: developed by Mo Hannah, PhD, as an adaptation of IMAGO, social learning, and EQ theory. In pilot studies is being taught at elementary school level by volunteer undergraduates. Research is exploring ripple effects on parent's relationships as well as long-term effects on the children.

Loving Well - developed at Boston University's School of Education, uses quality classic and modern literature to teach character education, social and emotional skills. It teaches the complexities, nuances, and consequences of attraction, commitment, love, and loss

[\(click for more information on the school based programs.\)](#)

Build It And They Will Come

CMFCE operates on optimism based on the growth of the marriage education field; on the enthusiastic acceptance of church and community-based mentor models; on the promise of prevention, and on the new curiosity and concern about the marriage and divorce conundrum. We anticipate a day when no one would dream of getting married without taking at least one skill-based premarital course. We even anticipate getting to the point where couples will take booster courses as they face predictable marital challenges and milestones or simply take refresher courses along the way to keep things humming.

My favorite story is about Chesterfield County, Virginia. In the early 90s the county mandated divorce education for divorcing couples with minor children. Divorce education, which is in place in many jurisdictions across the country, usually consists of requiring parents to watch a video about the effects of divorce on children before they can get their walking papers. Some few programs talk about do's and don'ts of post-divorce parenting, about not putting children in the middle. After a few years of this the workers in Chesterfield County burned-out. All that carnage. All that pain. All that "too little, too late." The county was still spending way too much on divorce-related problems - custody re-adjudication, child-support enforcement, delinquency, school-failure, stalking, violence.

Pat Cullen, director of the divorce education program, heard about a PREP training paid for by the Department of the Navy which allowed any government worker to attend. She took the two-day training and went home and persuaded the county government to subsidize a marriage education course. They offered it at \$55 per couple for seven Thursday nights in a row. The response was overwhelming. There is a perpetual waiting list and couples from neighboring counties lie about their residency to attend. This isn't about mandating. Couples want their marriages to work. They will grab a life raft if it's thrown in their direction. This is "Build it and they will come." This is about the future of marriages and families in America.

For a Directory of Programs visit CMFCE at www.smartmarriages.com

The Directory lists dozens of courses for couples and training opportunities for instructors.

CMFCE, LLC at cmfce@smartmarriages.com or at 202-362-3332

5310 Belt Rd, NW, Washington, DC, 20015-1961.

The annual Smart Marriages/Happy Families conference is open to all - professionals, policy makers, clergy, and the public. The conference includes pre and post conference training institutes that qualify participants to teach the courses described above.

[Back to top](#)

[Return to Marriage Reports](#)

[Return to Smart Marriages Home](#)