Healthy Marriage: What is it and why does it matter?

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A time of change........
A time of challenges……..

Healthy Marriage?
Thesis: Family structure and marriage, especially healthy marriage, matter for children (and adults). Family structure and healthy marriage are strongly linked with fertility. They need to remain on the research agenda, and, cautiously, on the program and policy agenda.
3 broad questions:

- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- What is meant by “healthy marriage”?
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?

First, a brief overview of Child Trends
Child Trends’ Mission

To improve outcomes for children.
We do this by providing research and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children:

- Policy makers
- Programs that serve children and families
- Foundations and philanthropists
- The media
Research Areas

- Indicators
- Education
- Early Childhood Development
- Fatherhood and Parenting
- Marriage and Family
- Child Welfare and Foster Care
- Health
- Poverty and Welfare
- Teen Sex and Pregnancy
- Positive Youth Development
What we do

- Track trends and identify emerging issues
- Provide data-driven, evidence-based guidance on policy and practice
- Help set the nation’s research agenda for children
- Evaluate important programs and policies
Welcome to the Child Trends DataBank
Welcome to the one-stop-shop for the latest national trends and research on over 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, with new indicators added each month! Provided by Child Trends, a national leader in the field for over 20 years...> Learn more

CrossCurrents Data Briefs
Welcome to CrossCurrents, a new series of data briefs from the Child Trends DataBank. These briefs draw from multiple indicators to examine broad topics and special populations of greatest concern to policymakers, service providers, the media, and the general public.

New Data Brief:
Pre-Kindergarten to Third Grade (PK-3) School-Based Resources and Third Grade Outcomes

Other briefs in the series include:
Are Teens Driving Safer?
Indicators of Early School Success and Child Well-Being
A Statistical Portrait of Well-being in Early Adulthood
Violence in the Lives of Children

What's New

Child Indicator Newsletter!

Read on
(Click here to view previous issues)

4/11 New Religiosity Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New Religious Service Attendance Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New Children with Special Health Care Needs Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New 2006 Dating Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New 2006 Volunteering Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New 2006 Television Viewing Estimates
> Read on

4/11 New 2007 Reading Proficiency Estimates
> Read on
LINKS SYNTHESIS

Listed below are fact sheets that synthesize the lessons learned from experimentally evaluated programs in the LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database.

- What Works for Adolescent Reproductive Health: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions
  Victoria Ball, Kristin A. Moore
  May 2008
  What Works Programs Table for Adolescent Reproductive Health

- What Works for Preventing and Stopping Substance Use in Adolescents: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions
  Tawana Bandy, Kristin A. Moore
  May 2008
  What Works Programs Table for Civic Engagement

- What Works for Civic Engagement: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions
  Andrew Rivers, Kristin A. Moore
  May 2008
  What Works Programs Table for Civic Engagement

- What Works for Education: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Social Interventions to Enhance Educational Outcomes
  Thomsen Ling, Kristin A. Moore
  May 2008
Research-to-Results

Strategies for improving out-of-school programs in rural communities

Background

Youth who live in rural areas are less likely to attend high school and complete college than their urban counterparts. These differences are evident in the ways students learn and succeed in school. For example, rural students are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. These differences may be due to a lack of access to educational resources and opportunities. This lack of access can be attributed to a variety of factors, including limited internet access, limited transportation options, and limited access to educational resources.

What are rural communities?

Rural communities can be defined as areas with populations of less than 2,500 people. These communities typically lack access to educational resources and opportunities, which can negatively impact student outcomes. Rural communities may also lack access to healthcare facilities and emergency medical services, which can further impact student outcomes.

What are the challenges for rural youth?

Rural youth face a number of challenges, including:

- Limited access to educational resources and opportunities
- Limited access to healthcare facilities and emergency medical services
- Limited transportation options
- Limited access to extracurricular activities

These challenges can lead to a lack of academic achievement and a lack of social and emotional well-being among rural youth.

Research-to-Results

Fact Sheet

Family and neighborhood risks: How they relate to involvement in out-of-school time activities

Background

Many studies show that children in high-risk neighborhoods are less likely to participate in out-of-school time programs and are more likely to have negative outcomes than children from more advantaged neighborhoods. These programs can help children from high-risk neighborhoods by providing them with opportunities to develop skills, build relationships, and receive support from adults.

Research shows that children from high-risk neighborhoods are less likely to participate in out-of-school time programs and are more likely to have negative outcomes than children from more advantaged neighborhoods. These programs can help children from high-risk neighborhoods by providing them with opportunities to develop skills, build relationships, and receive support from adults.

Research-to-Results

Practitioner Insights

Building community partnerships: Tips for out-of-school time programs

Background

Increasing community involvement in out-of-school time programs can yield significant benefits to programs and the students that they serve. Community partnerships have the potential to meet the diverse needs of students, improve parent and community involvement, and be more effective in reaching their goals.

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Research-to-Results

Fact Sheet

Children in low-income families have a higher risk of neighborhood risk

Background

Children in low-income families are at a higher risk of neighborhood risk. These families may face barriers to accessing educational resources and opportunities, which can negatively impact their well-being.

Research shows that children in low-income families are at a higher risk of neighborhood risk. These families may face barriers to accessing educational resources and opportunities, which can negatively impact their well-being.
Our lens is that of the child
Three broad questions:

- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- What is meant by “healthy marriage”?
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?
Functions of Research

- Monitor Trends
- Evaluate policies and programs
- Rule out problems
- Identify problems
- Identify antecedents and mediators
Research on the implications of family structure for:

- Families
- Adults (especially men)
- Children
Family Economic Well-Being

- Single-parent and cohabiting families have substantially lower incomes and are much more likely to be poor
- Because of:
  - Selection
  - Single parent families lose economies of scale when they maintain two households
  → Income/poverty is both cause and effect
Having two (potential earners) protects if:

✓ Unemployed
✓ Benefits are cut back
✓ Health problems
✓ Retirement
Adults

- Marriage provides fathers with more sure, sustained, and frequent interaction with their children

- Marriage increases the likelihood of support and interaction from both sets of grandparents/kin
Adult Health

- Better health is both cause and effect
- Being engaged and getting married are related to declines in drinking and marijuana use
- Divorce is related to increases in drinking, smoking, and to losses of private health insurance
- Marriage is associated with decreased depression
- Divorce is related to more depression, a loss of economies of scale, and lower incomes

But, marriage is related to modest weight gain and to less exercise among men.
Child well-being

✓ Children develop best in two biological or adoptive parent families
  • Effects are “modest”, but…..
  • Broad
    ➔ Academic
    ➔ Behavior
    ➔ Psychological well-being
Child well-being effects:

- For both boys and girls
- Across race/ethnicity groups (but most consistent for whites)
- Most kids are ok, but risks are much higher
Prof. Paul Amato, University of Pennsylvania, notes that the effects are modest but the numbers are large.

If 1980 proportion of children living with biological parents prevailed today:

- 300,000 fewer children 12-18 would repeat a grade;
- 485,000 fewer would be suspended from school;
- 250,000 fewer would need psychotherapy;
- 210,000 fewer would be involved in violence; and
- 30,000 fewer would attempt suicide annually.
Multiple Pathways for negative effects:

- Selection
- Experience of marital conflict
- Money
- Loss adequate supervision, parenting
- Turbulence

Effects for child are modest but broad, and also varied:

- Ending a violent, abusive marriage vs.
- Ending a “good enough” marriage
Most youth value marriage and plan to marry.
Considerable acceptance of:

- Cohabitation 64%
- Unmarried women having children 60%
- Divorce, if couple can’t work out problems 48%

Source: NSFG
How important is a good marriage and a family life?

Source: MTF Seniors
Do you expect to get married?

- Yes: 81%
- Uncertain: 15%
- No: 4%
Most high school seniors see marriage as “extremely” or “quite” important.
Most high school seniors expect to get married
Overall, on average:

- The case for marriage seems pretty solid, both in terms of children’s well-being and the well-being of adults and families.
- But, it is the experience of healthy marriage that is critical to the association with well-being.
  - Being legally married is not sufficient.
Three broad questions:

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- What are some issues on which further research is needed?
Conceptualizing “Healthy Marriage” project:

- Guiding framework
- Review of research
- Review of measures
- Cognitive interviews
Antecedents → Healthy Marriage → Consequences
Antecedents

- Employment, income
- Education
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Stress
- Social Support
- Social skills
- Substance use
- Incarceration
- Family background characteristics
- Children from a prior relationship
- Community context
- Religiosity
- Attitudes and values

Healthy Marriage

Consequences
Consequences

Antecedents → Healthy Marriage →

Adult well-being
• Employment, income, wealth
• Physical health; mortality
• Mental health
• Social support
• Satisfaction, & happiness
• Risk-taking, substance use, illegal activities
• Attitudes/values
• Religiosity

Child well-being
• Socio-emotional outcomes
• Cognitive attainment, & educational achievement
• Health & safety
• Attitudes/values towards marriage, & childbearing
• Offspring dating behavior, sexual activity, & relationship skills
• Marital stability in adulthood
What are the elements of a “healthy marriage”?

- Satisfaction
- Communication
- Interaction
- Commitment
- Emotional Intimacy
- Conflict Resolution
- Lack of Violence
- Fidelity
- Duration
- Status
Satisfaction

- Global satisfaction
- Standard of living, time together

I think of all the good things in our marriage, especially now that we’re parents – we’re both very dedicated.

We don’t have a lot of time [to spend together as a couple], so we have to make the most of what it is. It’s important to look at what time we do get, and not focus so much on how much we get.

I think our marriage is great; we have a lot of good times together.
Communication

- Quality and Style:
  - Honesty, openness, respectful tone

- Type and content:
  - Talking about each other’s days
  - Laughing together
  - Talking about the things that matter

*It means saying whatever you feel or think without being scared of what he might say. And it’s important to always tell the truth, no matter how big the issue is.*

*We ask, “How was your day at work?” We can relieve whoever had a rough day by letting them talk about it.*

*I’m not a mind reader, and neither is she.*
Communication

When you've been married a long time, you get to know what the other person thinks.

No you don't.
Interaction/Time together

- Day to day activities
- Social activities

It made me think of sharing daily things around the house like cooking and cleaning as partners.

Sometimes, it’s good to be alone and not go out with the kids.
We rent movies, go to the park or for a drive. Sunday is our day to get lost, just us.
Commitment to the couple

- A sense of “we-ness”
- Obligation
- Willingness to sacrifice for the other person
- Expectations that relationship is long term

_Being there spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and financially, no matter what._

_Staying together. Being truthful. We should be ready to make it work no matter what happens._

_Respecting each other at all times. Putting the other’s feelings before your own. Wanting the other to be happy and trying to keep them happy. Not giving up even if things get bumpy._
Emotional Intimacy

“She wants me to talk about my feelings, but every time I get close I get emotion sickness.”
Emotional Intimacy

- Feeling “known”
- Closeness
- Trust, counting on each other
- Not feeling loneliness

If I’m sick and need [to be] nursed, in a financial bind, or if I need to be more responsible, she gives me support to do that.

We can express what we are feeling or thinking without fearing that we’ll be criticized or laughed at.

We share the same views on what we expect later on in life; we have the same goals.

We’re there for each other. She can see when I just need a hug, I don’t even have to say a word.

Sex.
Conflict/Conflict Resolution

"Apparently I have done something to upset you."
Conflict/Conflict Resolution

- Sources of disagreements, such as chores, sex, time, money, family planning, drinking or drugs, friends, family or other women and men.
- Conflict resolution styles, such as keeping opinions to yourself, calm discussions, heated arguments, compromise, etc.

*Every marriage has its conflicts.*

*We know how to disagree without being disagreeable.*

“Some couples deal by yelling and screaming, but it’s wonderful when they find that they don’t have to. We used to write our feelings down and leave them out for the other person to read and come back to. We’d have the day to think about it after reading, and then we would talk about it without having to yell.”
Violence

- Physical and mental or psychological violence
- Includes physical assaults, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect

*That would be if she’s keeping tabs on me, knowing where I am at all times.*

*“Sometimes you really feel like hitting – this is when you should walk away.”*

*“Respect is very important. Hitting and pushing is not right.”*
Fidelity

- Infidelity is a “dealbreaker”
- Respondents rate likelihood that partner is cheating
- Ex-partners, especially those with children, are a difficult test for couples

She knows how to conduct herself when she’s not around me.

“Infidelity is the one issue that can be a cause for divorce.”

‘It can be one time or 20 times (sleeping with someone else), it doesn’t matter – if you did it, it’s cheating.”
Commitment to Children

“There must be something wrong with my parents. They’ve only been married ONCE!”
Commitment to the children

- Good co-parenting is tied to healthy relationships
- Children from previous relationships affect couples

[My spouse] went out to get a new job so that I could stay at home with the kids. He quit the job he had because it didn’t offer good benefits, even though he LOVED the job.

We might need new clothes or shoes but if the kids need them, we’ll get what they need first.
Duration and Status

- Legal status of relationship
- Duration of legal marriage
- Duration of relationship before marriage

*We don’t bring up the ‘D’ word – that’s what we’ve learned.*
Our measurement goal: a flexible set of measures

1. A scale of 100
2. Ten separate & distinct, stand-alone subscales
3. Some composites & some stand-alone subscales
4. Marital satisfaction alone
5. An index (x out of ten elements)
6. A measure of “good enough” marriages, that distinguishes the unhealthy marriages
7. A discrepancy score, that compares the perspectives of the husband with the perspective of the wife
We have also identified a number of observational measures

- Child Trends’ review of the literature revealed many observational studies dating back to the 1980s
- Particularly useful in measuring communication and interaction
- Conflict, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy also commonly measured
- Not as useful for commitment, violence, fidelity, and marital status and duration
Definition of Healthy Marriage:

- So far, respondents’ own definitions closely match our constructs
- Several respondents added shared spirituality and extended family involvement as part of the definition
Adaptability – an 11th element?

Adaptability: the ability to grow, change, and develop as individuals and as a couple over time
Antecedents

Healthy Marriage
Satisfaction
Communication
Interaction
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Emotional Intimacy
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Adaptability?

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The traditional pattern:

1. Dating/partnering
2. Marriage
3. Having children
4. Raising children
What permutations matter for the well-being of families, children and adults?
More research is needed, both quantitative and qualitative, micro and macro, on:

✓ Cohabitation
✓ Causes and prevention of domestic violence
✓ Gay couples
✓ Contraception
✓ Unintended pregnancy
✓ Teen childbearing and Non-marital childbearing
✓ Conflict resolution strategies
✓ Studies of Couples
✓ Comparisons with other countries
✓ Implications of family structure & marriage for communities
Evaluation Studies

- Random assignment experimental studies of approaches
  - Building Strong Families
  - Supporting Healthy Marriage
- Studies that combine job/income assistance with marriage education
- Marriage/relationship education for youth
- Premarital education
- Fatherhood programs
Implications for public policy?

- Remove marriage penalties
- The prevention of unplanned pregnancies
- Medicaid coverage of marriage counseling
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