

# Studies on the Family

*Stance for the Family* was created to encourage students from all disciplines to research and write about the institution of marriage and family. *Stance* emphasizes the impact that marriage and family have on society and increases awareness of current issues affecting the family.

Fall 2013



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## Purpose

*Studies on the Family* was created to encourage students from all disciplines to research and write about the institution of marriage and family. *Studies* emphasizes the impact that marriage and family have on society and increases awareness of current issues affecting the family.

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# IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL SOMEONE GETS HURT—OR IS IT?

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*Rachel Callister*

Television as a form of media is prevalent in today's world. Conversations revolve around what show or game was on last night. On average, Americans watch 4.29 hours of television every single day, which means that the average American spends over 1,500 hours watching TV in any given year (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The influence that television has on our lives is astronomical and worth investigating.

Television is full of a variety of content that can be either beneficial or detrimental. One controversial area of content is violence. It has been shown that 60% of TV shows contain violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). According to the Social Learning theory, we imitate what we are exposed to, whether by a live model, verbal instruction, or media (Bandura, 1977). One study found that the more time an adolescent spent watching TV, the greater the risk of engaging in consecutive aggressive acts as an adult (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002). Exposure to violence affects our actions.

If violence in the media is so influential for adults, it must have an impact on children as well. Teachers and parents must understand how much and what type of violence is illustrated in the television cartoons that children watch. Klein and Shiffman (2011) conducted a content-analysis study on gun violence in children's cartoons and found that the cartoons unrealistically portray the consequences of gun violence on the victim. We hypothesize that, more often than not, children's cartoons fail to show consequence and outward injury after a violent act. Further, we hypothesize that children's

cartoons tend to portray nonhuman characters initiating violence caused by aggression more than they portray humanlike characters doing the same.

## Methods

For this study we used a content analysis of Saturday morning cartoons to collect data for the research experiment. The content analysis involved setting up a coding sequence in order to maintain consistency among the researchers. We coded the top four most popular Saturday morning cartoons, which are, according to TV by the Numbers, the following: *Ben 10*, *Young Justice*, *Green Lantern*, and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. Each cartoon show was coded for 2 hours. In total we coded for 8 hours of violent acts in these cartoons.

In the study, we coded for four variables: aggressor, reason, injury, and consequence. Aggressor was assessed based on two subcategories: human or nonhuman. We defined the aggressor by its physical appearance, not including special abilities which might distinguish it as nonhuman. The second variable, reason, describes the initiator's motivation to act violently and was categorized as either aggression or self-defense. We coded the third variable, injury, in yes or no form and defined it as any audio or visual depiction of the result of a violent act, including blood, broken bones, and bruises. The last variable was physical consequence, which denotes whether or not there was a physical punishment for the initial violent act. The reliability for each variable is as follows: aggressor,  $\kappa = 0.671$ ; reason,  $\kappa = 0.364$ ; injury,  $\kappa = 0.265$ ; physical consequence,  $\kappa = 0.311$ . Due to these low reliability statistics, we altered our coding scheme. We changed the subcategories of the physical consequence variable to yes or no format instead of *positive*, *negative*, or *neither*. We also expanded our definition of *injury* to include visual damage to inanimate objects.

## Results

For each violent act, we coded for reason and aggressor. Sixty percent of all aggressive acts were committed by nonhuman agents. Sixty-one percent of acts done in self-defense were performed by human characters. Table 1 shows the expected and observed frequencies.

Table 1. Expected and observed frequencies for reason and aggressor

Reason	Aggressor	
	Human	Nonhuman
Aggressive	71 (80.9)	106 (96.1)
Self-defense	40 (30.1)	26 (35.9)

Note: Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.

A chi-square analysis revealed that there were more aggressive acts made by nonhumans and more self-defense acts made by humans than expected:  $\chi^2 (1) = 8.137$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

The consequence for each violent act was recorded: 72% received no consequence after the violent act, meaning that only 29% of the violent acts received a consequence. Table 2 shows the expected and observed frequencies.

Table 2. Expected and observed frequencies for consequence

Consequence	
Yes	70 (121.5)
No	173 (121.5)

Note: Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.

A chi-square analysis revealed that there were more nonconsequences for violent acts than expected:  $\chi^2 (1) = 43.658$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

Injury for each violent act was observed. Of these violent acts, 69% inflicted no visual injury to the victim, meaning that only 31% showed visual injury. Table 3 shows the expected and observed frequencies.

Table 3. Expected and observed frequencies for injury

Injury	
Yes	74 (121.0)
No	168 (121.0)

Note: Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.

A chi-square analysis revealed that there were more violent acts that did not show visual injury than violent acts that did:  $\chi^2 (1) = 36.512$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

## Discussion

Violent acts are immensely prevalent in children's cartoons. Our results determined that there is about one violent act for every two minutes of cartoon content. Therefore, about half of the material that children are watching contains violence.

One interesting discovery in our study was the lack of punishment for violence; the majority of the observed violent acts had no consequences for physically aggressive behavior. This pattern in children's cartoons relays a message to children that violent behavior will not be punished and, in some cases, will even be rewarded.

Another interesting result was that violence portrayed in cartoons rarely shows visual injury. The majority of physical attacks against a character did not cause any outward sign of injury in the form of blood, broken bones, or bruises. This concept highlighted in children's cartoons conveys to children the idea that violence does not inflict physical harm on others. According to the Social Learning theory, children will symbolically see, through the media they watch, that violence does not yield negative outcomes. Exposing children to violence in media might encourage them to imitate the acts they observe, especially if there is no negative consequence that follows. The implications of these findings are significant in observing the behavior of children who watch shows that contain high levels of physical aggression.

Physical aggression was illustrated differently depending on whether the character was human or nonhuman. Humans were portrayed as more likely to initiate physical aggression out of self-defense. In contrast, non-humans were shown as more likely to initiate violence because of aggression. This pattern can actually be beneficial to children in that it teaches them the importance of self-defense in protection of their family, friends, and community. Since children relate more easily to human characters, the effect is more powerful than if self-defense behaviors were enacted by nonhuman characters.

Overall, the findings supported our hypotheses. Children's cartoons did not depict realistic injuries or consequences after a violent act. Also, there was a noticeable difference between the motives of human characters and those of nonhuman characters in initiating violent acts. The results of the study support previous research that has been done on this

topic, especially regarding the lack of consequences shown after aggressive acts.

One limitation of this study was that the amount of content that was coded is not sufficient to make generalizations about violence in all children's cartoons. Another limitation was the low reliability score calculated for the coder's accuracy. Future research could make a distinction between reward and punishment in regards to the consequence variable. Further research could also examine the actual behaviors of children who watch cartoons containing a large amount of violence.

Violence is very apparent in the cartoons children are exposed to on a daily basis. As shown by the findings of our content analysis, it is possible that TV violence might give children a false sense of reality when it comes to the consequences and injuries that occur as a result of physical aggression. Children might try to mimic what they watch on television and, as a result, inflict pain or harm on others. Understanding what children today are exposed to will help parents, teachers, and mentors better monitor children's behavior and instruct them on the realities of violence.

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# TEACHING CHILDREN TO VALUE MONEY

*Rebecca Lin Densley*

John F. Kennedy once said, “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future” (Kennedy, 1963). Hearing such a bold statement often invokes feelings of pride in adults toward their children. However, it is wise to remember that children don’t just mold themselves. They will never reach their potential of being the “best hope for the future” if they don’t have mentors around them teaching and modeling the kind of behavior that will help them get there. In today’s world more than ever, it is crucial that children learn how to be such a hope.

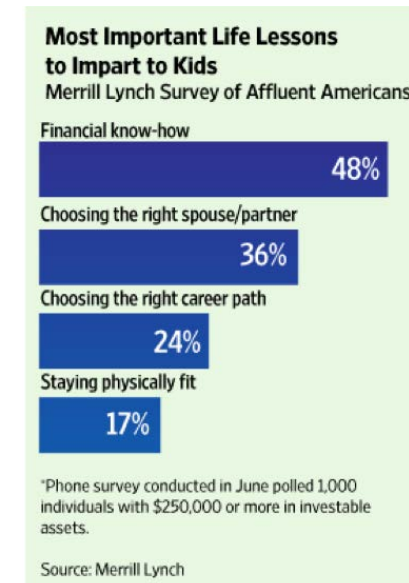
The United States is currently facing an economic crisis. Speculation after speculation has been made as to how we arrived at such a bad predicament, but often those who speculate overlook the most simple of solutions: our nation is filled with people who don’t know how to manage money. In 2002, a poll showed that only 25% of American adults consider themselves “good at living within their financial means” (Clarke, Heaton, Israelsen, & Eggett, 2005). These are shocking numbers, especially if we remember that many of these adults are parents. If only one-fourth of them know how to manage money, how can we expect children to learn to do the same?

The unfortunate—but expected—news is that children aren’t learning, and parents know they should do better (see Figure 1). In 2006, a national survey testing high school students on basic financial principles showed an average score of a mere 52%. Among many questions, results indicated that most students don’t understand that they would no longer have health insurance coverage if their parents were to become unemployed. Also, many students did not know that savings and interest can be taxed, or that stocks,

bonds, and savings have different long-term returns. This was the fifth year in a row that students nationwide flunked the exam (Gandel, 2006).

It is clear that some major adjustments must be made to help children develop financial competency to carry with them into adulthood. All hope for this financial literacy in future generations relies on parents getting involved early, proactively teaching their kids good money management, and learning and practicing good skills themselves. To best understand the issue and know how to fix it, we must delve into the problems and the most effective solutions.

Figure 1: Most important life lessons to impart to kids



## Problems

The problems leading to a nation of financially illiterate children are numerous. However, most of the issues come down to parents who have no skills themselves or who unintentionally worsen the problem by making simple mistakes in an attempt to teach their children good principles.

Adults today have many financial challenges. The national savings rate is currently very low; on average, Americans save only 4% of their income, compared to 8% twenty years ago. Additionally, bankruptcy has



risen by a shocking 400% in the past two decades and continues to rise steadily (Martin & Olivia, 2001; Clarke et al., 2005). With numbers such as these, it seems that adults in the United States are fighting a losing battle. The average American adult carries eight credit cards and has at least \$8,000 of credit card debt at any given time. Parents who are weighed down with debt, with little to no savings, try to make ends meet in their homes. Such major financial issues do not mesh well together. Unfortunately, these statistics suggest that adults today lack the financial competency to be good teachers to their children (Clarke et al., 2005; Martin & Olivia, 2001).

Another major problem is that some parents attempt to teach their children money management in ways that are more detrimental than anything. One of the most common mistakes parents can make, says Stephen Gandel (2006), is giving their children unearned allowance. When children aren't required to work for their allowance, they develop the false idea that money will always come, so there is no need to save. However, when they work for the money they receive, they have a better understanding of how money works and are more likely to save up their hard-earned cash.

Another simple mistake that parents make is thinking that their children will benefit most from financial instruction outside of the home. However, Gandel (2006) reports that "financial education doesn't seem to work. High school seniors who have taken financial literacy classes don't do any better on the personal finance test than students who haven't taken a course. . . . Taking finance classes doesn't make kids better spenders or savers either, and may actually increase the likelihood that they'll pick up some harmful habits." To many, this doesn't seem to make sense. Why wouldn't finance classes improve the money-managing skills of teens? Researchers Martin and Olivia suggest that by the time children hit their teenage years, their ideas and skills related to money management are already set (by watching the example of their parents). In fact, children begin developing these ideas as early as age three (Martin & Olivia, 2001).

In an attempt to discover this age, Olivia and Martin conducted a study that would determine the earliest age at which children develop preferences for certain commercial products. Findings show that preschool-aged children not only have developed such preferences but that they also have the skills to persuade their parents to purchase the preferred products. When young children throw tantrums at the supermarket in an attempt to get their parents to buy something, their parents'

reaction can have a lasting effect. Giving in to such behavior can lay a foundation of impulse purchasing. Impulse purchase habits are a prominent feature in our culture of debt. Alternatively, using a moment in the supermarket to teach a three-year-old that purchases must be made within certain bounds can model important financial skills (Martin & Olivia, 2001).

## Solutions

Understanding that parental modeling has such an impact on children and that kids begin to develop ideas about money so early lead us to logically conclude that the best financial teaching is done early and within the boundaries of the home. There is clearly no adequate substitute for an involved and concerned parent, and even parents know this (see Figure 1). Interestingly, research shows that teaching kids about finances may be easier than we think. In fact, if parents would talk openly, begin teaching early, and take the opportunity to make every moment a learning experience, kids would have much better financial habits (Clarke et al., 2005; Martin & Olivia, 2001; Chappell, 2010).

Possibly the most important of these ideas is to begin teaching good financial habits early. A three-year-old child doesn't need to understand the economic principles of interest and inflation. However, that child would benefit from a parent allowing him or her to hand over the cash at the grocery store, accompanied by a simple explanation about making purchases (Martin & Olivia, 2001). Also, parents often make the mistake of assuming that family finances are not the child's business. However, the more openly parents discuss money, especially their personal financial mistakes, the better children will know how to apply simple money-management principles in their own lives (Chappell, 2010). Sharing such personal examples fosters an emotional response in children, thus instilling a lesson about money they won't likely forget.

It is also essential for adults to create and make the most of teaching moments (Graves & Earl, 2011). Just like taking the opportunity to share personal experiences, the more parents have open discussions and object lessons with their children, the more financial understanding children will have (Martin & Olivia, 2001). This can be difficult for parents because it is not always easy to identify a good teaching moment. However, in a recent article in *Careers and Money Magazine*, Kevin Chappell gives some

examples of simple everyday opportunities that create the best money-teaching moments. His list includes the four following everyday scenarios: grocery shopping, eating out, withdrawing money from the ATM, and giving allowance (Chappell, 2010).

Chappell (2010) says that moments like these are great times to teach life lessons about money management because each scenario can be simplified in such a way that a child can understand, analyze, and even apply the principle in question. Grocery shopping alone can teach multiple lessons, such as brand-name versus generic items or the value of waiting for something to go on sale. When eating out, showing your child the bill at the end of the meal helps him or her to grasp the reality of spending. While at the ATM or when giving out allowance, discussing with children the simple fact that money is finite can help them draw the connection between deposits and withdrawals as well as what it means to earn money for yourself (Chappell, 2010). Ultimately, the more a parent uses simple examples in everyday life, the better children will understand how money works.

## Conclusion

Obviously, there is much to do. Children, teens, and adults across the United States struggle with understanding and budgeting money (Clarke et al., 2005; Gandel, 2006; Martin & Olivia, 2001). But this is no reason to give up hope. Our current economic crisis can be reversed if parents of the rising generation stick to the simple principles of early intervention, proactive teaching, and self-improvement (Clarke et al., 2005; Gandel, 2006). Although it may take a little sacrifice, effort spent teaching children is a worthwhile investment. After all, they are our “best hope for the future” (Kennedy, 1963).

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY MEALS TO ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

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*Shaylia D. Johnson*

As a very young child, my uncle would often want to say the family prayer. This childlike prayer always, regardless of the situation, consisted of the same words: “Heavenly Father. Please bless. Thank you for the food. Name of Jesus Christ. Amen.” Even at the young age of four he had learned that food and family meals were an important aspect of his family life.

For adolescents, family meals are necessary. Some studies claim family meals are a “respite from the frenzied world of peers and the demands of school” (Larson & Richards, 1994, p. 99 as cited in Offer, 2013, p. 26). However, in our fast-paced society, family time is often the last thing on our minds. Between work, school, hobbies, and technology, meals are often rushed or forgotten entirely. This is troubling because, as Offer (2013) states, “family time is considered beneficial to family functioning and individual’s well-being” (p. 26). Family time offers adolescents an opportunity to take a break from their hectic schedules to regroup.

Certain families, however, are at higher risk of losing important family time than others. Although one study shows that trends in family meals have remained constant over time from 1999 to 2010, and even gone slightly up for members of higher socioeconomic backgrounds, family meals for members of low socioeconomic backgrounds are going down (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Fulkerson, & Larson, 2013, p. 201). Because low-income youth are already at higher risk for poor health, family meals are of even greater importance for this demographic.

All families, however, must instigate family mealtimes into their own households to receive the benefits which lead to better overall health. Ideally, parents should decide to hold family meals and have them every night. However, this does not always happen. Instead, parents often make holding nightly family meals a goal but become discouraged and give up on mealtimes entirely when they fail to produce a family meal each night. To remedy this, parents should begin by trying to get the family together at least once a week to enjoy a meal together. Over time, the number of family meals can slowly be increased until eating together as a family is a nightly occurrence. For families that already have regular family dinners, parents should increase the effectiveness of these meals by using it as a time to connect with their children and strengthen their family unit. This can be done through constructive communication between all family members.

Parents must understand the benefits eating together as a family has on adolescent health. Neumark-Sztainer (2006) states, “Families should be made aware of the importance of family meals and encouraged to think about how to make these meals more of a priority in their own homes” (p. 103). The home is a child’s first place of learning. In the home, parents can be wonderful models of the healthy lifestyles teens should seek to attain. Because of this, family meals, which bring both parents and teens together, can help create a protective environment for adolescents to grow in. This is accomplished by the quality time families can enjoy simply by sitting down around the dinner table to eat and converse with one another.

## Review of Literature

These pieces of literature give information on family meals and how they improve adolescent development by improving physical and mental health, creating family happiness, and providing a safety net for children against risk behaviors.

### *Behavioral Health*

Family meals can help to teach teens appropriate healthy behavior. Skeer and Ballard (2013) review the association between family meals and decreased adolescent risk behaviors including drugs and alcohol use, aggression, poor school performance, sexual behavior, mental health problems,

and disordered eating. Miller, Waldfogel, and Han (2012) researched the connection family meals have to child academics and behavior.

### *Physical Health*

Family meals can help to incorporate healthy eating habits into adolescents' lifestyles. Berge, Wickel, and Doherty (2012) look at the relationship between family meals (both quantity and quality) and healthy BMI (Body Mass Index). Utter et al. (2013) claim that family meals provide opportunity for adolescents to consume healthy foods.

### *Emotional Health*

Family meals can help develop adolescents' overall emotional health and stability. Offer (2013) as well as Musick and Meier (2012) discuss the correlation family time, including family meals, has on adolescents' emotional well-being. Johnson (2013) looks at the connection between family meals and overall family happiness. Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Lehto (2013) look at different social factors which influence happiness and depression in children. Weinstein (2005) discusses the overall benefits family meals have on families.

### *Recent Trends*

Studies show the occurrence of family meal times is decreasing. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2013) look at the trends of family meal frequency from 1999 to 2010. Pedersen, Holstein, Flachs, and Rasmussen (2013) and Burgess-Champoux, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, and Story (2009) both discuss the influence meal frequency during adolescence has on meal frequency later in life. Steinberg (2011) looks at all aspects of adolescent development.

## **Eating Meals Together as a Family**

### *Definition of Family Meals*

The term "family" can have broad meanings. At its most basic level it is a group of individuals who identify themselves as a family and usually live in the same household. Most often these individuals are biologically related; however, this is not always the case, such as with blended families.

Traditionally, family meals consist of these family members coming together around a table to enjoy eating food with one another. Effective and valuable family meals occur without outside distractions such as work, school, or technology. Findings show that an increasing number of dinnertimes are spent in the car or in front of the TV (Weinstein, 2005, pp. 91–92). Although these meals are often spent with others, simply eating in the same room does not create a successful family meal. Instead, family members must come together to eat a meal and converse. This does not have to take place at home and in fact can provide practice for social skills such as table manners. However, because family members typically are more open and themselves in private, a majority of family meals should take place within the walls of their own home.

These family meals can occur at any time throughout the day, whether it be morning, noon, or night. However, I mainly focus on nighttime family dinners. For this study, I also assume that the family is functioning as a healthy unit and that there is no abuse, excessive alcohol or drug use, or other harmful practices going on in the home.

### *Frequency of Family Meals*

The frequency of family meals is a determinant factor in the amount of benefits these meals provide. Ideally, family dinners should take place every night with all family members present. However, the number of adolescents who eat dinners with their families is decreasing. Figure 1 shows that between the ages of 6 and 17 there is an 18.5% decrease in the number of children who participate in family meals. In other recent trends, only 58% of children eat five or more meals per week with their parents (CASA, 2012, as cited in Skeer & Ballard, 2013). These trends indicate that family meals are happening less often, especially for adolescents, so the benefits that these meals provide are not being received.

Individual family factors also contribute to the frequency of family meals. Musick and Meier (2012) have found that "the frequency of family meals is undoubtedly related to family resources, relationships, and other characteristics that contribute to well-being" (p. 477). Because the trends in society are placing less emphasis on the family, these beneficial characteristics are decreasing. Parents must be vigilant in maintaining strong family relationships by providing their families with beneficial family time. Increasing the number of meals eaten together each week is one way parents can accomplish this.

*Importance of Family Meals*

Family meals are important for the development of adolescent and lifelong health. Parents can structure dinnertimes so they take place in a comfortable environment where personal connection and discussion can take place. Family dinnertime can also provide a situation where children feel accepted and heard.

What is served for dinner is not as important as what is taking place at dinner. Weinstein (2005) argues that during meals “sitting face-to-face, inviting interaction, [and] give-and-take” matter most (p. 87). At mealtimes, parents teach their children physically, behaviorally, and emotionally healthy habits which will encourage positive growth and development throughout the children’s lives. Overall health is most easily taught in this safe and open environment because both parents and children are comfortable and can easily communicate with one another.

**Parents: A Model for a Healthy Lifestyle***Parental Presence at Family Meals*

Family meals are important opportunities for parents to spend time with their children. Offer (2013) discovered that teens spend approximately 20 hours per week with either one or both parents engaging in activities that are beneficial to their well-being. Dinnertime is one such activity. Although both adults and children are extremely busy due to work, school, and other pursuits, parents should still bring their families together each night to eat together. However, just physically being together is not enough. Parents must be mentally and emotionally present in order to benefit their children. Scholars contend that family meals promote well-being by giving parents and children the opportunity to talk about important matters, provide support for each other, and reinforce shared values (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006 and Ochs & Shohet, 2006 as cited in Offer, 2013). Parents can guide these conversations and view dinnertime not as a rushed meal but as an opportunity to connect with their busy children, especially their adolescents. By being present at mealtimes, parents can provide structure and positive influences for their children.

*Teaching Children to Lead a Healthy Lifestyle*

Youth need role models that can teach them how to lead a healthy lifestyle. Adolescence is a time of physical, mental, and social growth. The choices teens make while they are young will stay with them throughout their lives. A parental model can provide a guideline for the choices teens should make. Without the guidance of a parental figure, some teens may not understand the consequences of some of their actions, such as turning to disordered eating for weight control. Following the example of good parents can be a factor in helping adolescents lead a full and healthy life.

Neumark-Sztainer (2006) claims that broader influences such as peers and society tend to impact adolescent choices over parents, specifically when it comes to food choices (p. 91). However, Neumark-Sztainer (2006) also shows that “although adolescents appear not to be overly concerned about their nutrition and health, many teens are concerned about their weight” (p. 92). Changing bodies during puberty can make weight a difficult issue during adolescence, and because of this many teens turn to practices such as disordered eating in order to control their weight. This is not only physically unhealthy but also behaviorally and emotionally unhealthy. Because adolescents are still developing, they do not understand the consequences such actions will bring. Therefore, they need a model for how to live a healthy lifestyle.

*Parents at Family Meals Provide a Model for a Healthy Lifestyle*

Parents provide a model that teaches their children how to live a healthy life by demonstrating characteristics of healthy behavioral, physical, and emotional well-being. Offer (2013) claims that adolescents have greater positive outcomes and lower stress levels when both parents, but especially the father, are present at mealtimes. Musick and Meier (2012) verify this by stating that “teens who scored higher on indicators of family quality also ate more frequently with their parents” (p. 489). At family meals parents have the opportunity to discuss and demonstrate a healthy lifestyle. This allows adolescents to easily observe and model their own lives after their parents’ lives.

Parents also provide stable relationships for their children. Studies show that these relationships are created by shared involvement in daily routines and rituals such as family meal times (Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh and Tubbs, Roy, & Burton, 2005 as cited in Offer, 2013). This trust encourages adolescents to model their choices after their parents’ behaviors.



## Learning Healthy Practices as a Teen

### *Adolescents' Behavioral Health*

Autonomy drives teens to separate themselves from their parents, causing parents to have limited control over their children's lives and choices. However, because children have been found to desire routine and stability (Fiese, 2000 and Fomby & Cherlin, 2007 as cited in Musick & Meier, 2012), family meals provide a daily opportunity for parents to teach their children and to maintain a stable family environment.

However, parents still need to find ways to remain present in their children's lives without denying autonomy. Increased autonomy causes adolescents to desire to be seen as adults, so teens naturally distance themselves from their parents. Family meals allow parents an opportunity to give their adolescents freedom and treat them as adults while also continuing to monitor and teach their teens. In this way the structure of family meals fulfills the needs of both parents and children.

**DEVELOPMENT OF BASIC SOCIAL SKILLS.**—Basic social skills, specifically conversational, are developed around the dinner table. Offer (2013) states that “scholars contend that family meals promote well-being by giving parents and children the opportunity to talk about important matters, provide support to each other, and reinforce shared values” (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006 and Ochs & Shohet, 2006 as cited in Offer, 2013, p. 28). Speaking with one another around the dinner table teaches children how to properly converse with both adults and peers. Parents also teach children tact by demonstrating how to properly avoid topics which could create arguments (Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). Because communication is such an integral part of functioning in society, being able to effectively converse with others about important matters can assist youth in daily social settings.

**PROTECTION AGAINST RISK BEHAVIORS.**—Family meals protect adolescents against risk behaviors which are harmful to overall health. These behaviors include things such as use of “alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and other drugs; aggressive and/or violent behaviors; poor school performance; sexual behavior; mental health problems; and disordered eating patterns” (Skeer & Ballard, 2013, p. 943). Although Miller et al. (2012) claim there is no significant correlation between family-meal frequency and behavioral outcomes, Skeer and Ballard (2013) argue that “regular family meals have been shown to reduce adolescents' engagement in various risk behaviors”

(p. 943). This is accomplished because adolescents spend quality time with their parents at mealtimes. During adolescence, teens absorb their parents' values and observe their parents' examples of healthy behavior. Findings show that teens who eat less than three family dinners each week are more likely to smoke, drink, and get poor grades than teens who eat five to seven family dinners each week (CASA, 2010 as cited in Musick & Meier, 2012). At family meals, parents provide positive examples for their adolescents in avoiding risky behaviors.

Adolescents who spend their evenings eating dinner with their families are also less likely to participate in delinquent behaviors. Being at home allows parents to monitor where their children are after school and what they are doing. Parents can also keep watch over their teens through dinnertime conversation. By asking their children to report on the day's events, parents become aware of their children's activities, and children learn to be responsible for their own actions. Parents should also discuss their own daily occurrences to demonstrate their own appropriate behaviors. By following the examples their parents set at family meals, teens can avoid risk behaviors and create a pattern of healthy conduct in their own lives.

### *Adolescents' Physical Health*

Parents at family meals demonstrate how to live well by their choices in diet and physical lifestyle.

**MAINTENANCE OF HEALTHY WEIGHT.**—Family meals can provide nutritious foods, which aid in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. By cooking and eating at home, parents can monitor the amounts of unhealthy ingredients their children are eating. This can reduce the number of harmful calories consumed and help to maintain a healthy body weight.

Family meals have also been shown to have a positive effect on Body Mass Index (BMI). Based on a height-to-weight ratio, BMI is the quickest and easiest way to determine if a person is in a healthy weight range. There are flaws in this system because it does not take into account body type or muscle-to-fat ratios, but it is useful in providing general information about an individual's health. In today's society, BMIs are increasing as obesity becomes more prevalent, especially in America, which, as studies show, is now “the fattest nation in the world” (Weinstien, 2005, p. 94). However, across the world in places such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Finland, and New

Zealand, studies show strong correlations between frequency of family meals and good nutrition (Utter et al., 2013). By eating together as a family, nutritionally healthy habits are established, helping to maintain a healthy BMI.

Scholars claim that the quality of these family meals, along with the quantity, helps adolescents maintain healthy BMI status because family meals provide not only nutritious foods but also a stress-free environment (Berge, Wickel, & Doherty, 2012). High amounts of stress are unhealthy and can cause weight gain. By providing adolescents with a calm environment each night, parents set a beneficial habit and help their children avoid poor health. Likewise, increasing the quantity of family meals per week also sets up a reliable routine in which adolescents receive these same benefits. Maximizing the number of family meals helps each family member achieve and maintain healthy body weight.

**ACHIEVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.**—Although physical activity is not typically done at the dinner table, eating together can increase family members' levels of physical activity. Studies show that "a key factor in helping families to be more physically active and eat more healthfully [is] to involve the whole family in these efforts through routines such as family meals and activities" (Berge, Arikian, Doherty, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012, p. 128). By including all individuals in family rituals aimed toward maintaining health, each person becomes responsible not only for his or her own well-being but the well-being of the family as a whole. This sense of shared responsibility can help motivate those family members, specifically adolescents, who may struggle with having the time or the desire to be physically active and fit. Parents can also set an example of physical activity and then discuss the recreation they enjoy with their children during the daily reflections around the dinner table. By setting up a healthy home environment, parents help their adolescent children become physically healthy.

### *Adolescents' Emotional Health*

**OVERALL FAMILY HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION.**—High levels of overall family happiness and satisfaction are extremely important for families. Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Lehto (2013) explain that "good relationships

within the family strongly predicted high happiness [in adolescents]" (p. 611). Family members have an excellent opportunity to connect with one another and develop good relationships by participating in family meals. As studies show, family meals allow family time that is high in both quality and quantity (Offer, 2013). However, because the mood of a single individual can influence the whole family dynamic, the entire family should be present at family dinner to receive the most benefit.

Although it is not known if happy families create family mealtimes or if family mealtimes create happy families, findings show, on average, that people who report a high frequency of family meals also tend to report high levels of family happiness (Johnson, 2013). In light of this correlation between family meals and family happiness, families should spend more time together participating in family rituals such as mealtimes in order to create a more peaceful home environment. This is especially beneficial in families that are at greater risk for difficulty and strain, such as single-parent homes and low-income households.

**OVERALL PERSONAL HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION.**—Regular family meals can increase an adolescent's overall personal happiness and satisfaction. Cheerfulness is important to an adolescent's healthy development and should therefore be fostered. Studies show correlations between family meals and social, mental, and emotional competence in early childhood (see Figure 2) (Dickstein & Martin, 2002 as cited in Fulkerson, Strauss, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Boutelle, 2007). Increasing the number of family meals that adolescents participate in each week strengthens relationships between family members and creates a calm and structured atmosphere. A calm mealtime environment helps increase children's levels of happiness and mental stability, which further benefit children throughout their adolescence. Although one study (Musick & Meier, 2012) argues that certain associations do not persist into adulthood, the overall benefits do help in the long run and assist in adolescent satisfaction. Scholars agree that family meals are important routines which "provide the bedrock for building and maintaining emotional health throughout the life span" (Fiese et al., 2002 as cited in Fulkerson et al., 2007).

Regular family mealtimes also benefit youth who are at risk for obesity. Studies show that when family meals are made a priority, adolescents experience increased psychological well-being, specifically dealing with depressive symptoms and unhealthy weight-control behaviors (Fulkerson et

al., 2007). Parents can create this positive environment to help reduce the negative outcomes these teens are already at risk for.

Parents provide an example to their children of stable emotional well-being. Studies show that mealtimes provide a daily opportunity for parents to emotionally connect with their children and monitor their happiness in a loving environment (Musick and Meier, 2012). Although it is not known in some studies whether “regular family mealtimes foster teen health [or if] healthy teens are more likely to participate in family mealtimes” (Fulkerson et al., 2007, p. 184), eating meals as a family holds definite benefits for adolescents’ emotional health.

### **Family Meals Help Teens Learn Healthy Practices**

Family meals help adolescents by providing an atmosphere where they can learn healthy lifestyle choices. Studies show that teens who eat meals with their families demonstrate higher intakes of more nutritious foods and lower intakes of less nutritious foods. They also show lower levels of disordered eating and other risk behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Skeer & Ballard, 2013).

Children learn primarily from observation and experience, and family meals provide an atmosphere in which both can occur. Parents are responsible for setting up an environment where adolescents can watch their parents’ behavior and model their choices. Steinberg (2011) discusses that although adolescents increasingly turn to their peers for opinions, they still seek their parents’ advice for long-term choices. Family dinner gives adolescents a chance to seek this advice from their parents and other family members. Family mealtimes, therefore, become a foundation for developing a healthy lifestyle.

### **A Healthy Lifestyle Is a Result of Learning Healthy Practices as a Teen**

Choices teens make during their adolescence continue to influence them as adults. One study found that adults tend to maintain the level of health and

risk behaviors they developed as adolescents (Pedersen, Holstein, Flachs, & Rasmussen, 2013). Another study found that adolescents who ate dinner with their families had more healthy diets and meal patterns than other adolescents (Burgess-Champoux, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2009). These healthy behaviors learned at family meals help to set up a lifetime of benefits.

Habits created during the early years also continue throughout life. Pedersen et al. (2013) claim that meal frequencies tend to remain fairly constant from early to late adolescence and from late adolescence to early adulthood. Because studies show that family meals tend to decrease in frequency throughout adolescence (Burgess-Champoux et al., 2009), families should place greater priority on continuing to hold nightly family dinners. Mealtimes provide the ideal setting for adolescents to learn healthy practices.

### **Conclusion**

Additional research regarding this topic remains to be done. Questions such as “Does the number of children in a home influence the frequency of family meals?” “How does religion impact family meals?” “How do family meals affect sibling relationships?” and “What types of family structure holds family meals most frequently?” still need to be addressed through further investigation. Although these questions are not yet answered, current research does show that there are great benefits for families who sit down to enjoy a meal together.

Families should strive to hold nightly family dinners because the lifelong benefits this practice provides will help the growing generation communicate more effectively, avoid risk behaviors, maintain healthy weight, live healthier lives, and achieve greater happiness. Family meals are the perfect opportunity for parents to model an optimum lifestyle and instill healthy practices in their teens because they provide both quality and quantity time for family members to connect. By sitting down together to eat dinner as a family, adolescents’ behavioral, physical, and emotional health increase. Parents should be aware of the many benefits of holding regular family dinner and should integrate the practice into their own homes.

Percentage of 6- to 17-Year-Olds Who Ate Meals with Their Families at Least 6 Days per Week, by Age (2003, 2007, and 2011).

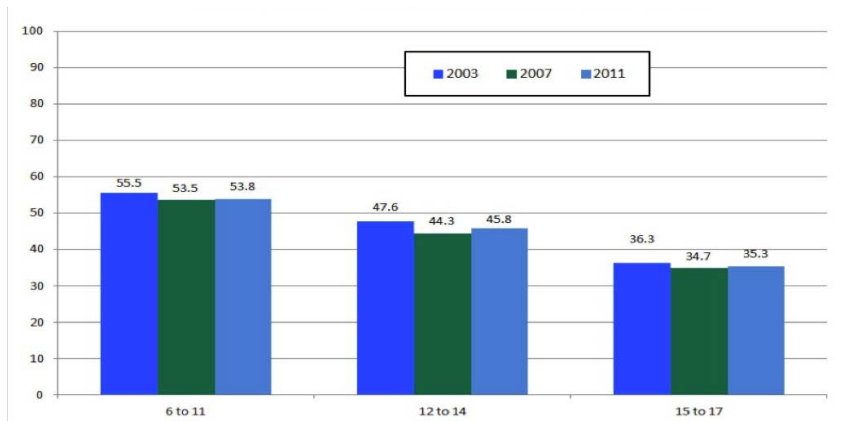


Figure 1. Percentage of 6- to 17-year-olds who ate meals with their families at least 6 days per week. Source: [http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/96\\_fig3.jpg](http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/96_fig3.jpg)

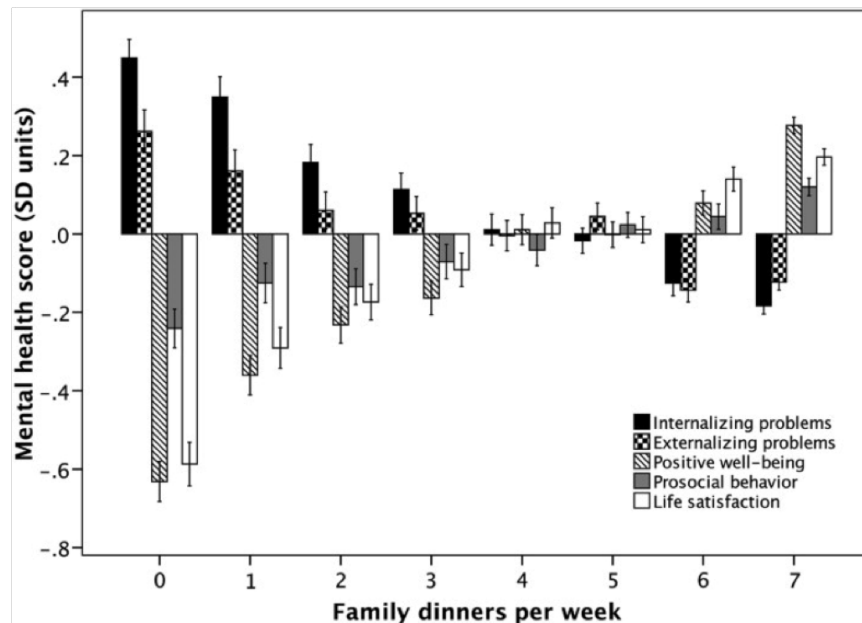


Figure 2. Mental health scores based on the number of family dinners per week. Source: <http://origin-ars.els-cdn.com/content/image/1-s2.0-S1054139X12003175-gr1.jpg>

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# MARRIAGE VERSUS COHABITATION: WHY MARRIAGE IS IMPORTANT

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*Melissa Lott McDonald*

In the 1950s, cohabitation used to be something that only the lower socioeconomic class participated in. In contrast, today many people in America believe cohabitation to be necessary before marriage. They see marriage as a super-relationship, “a status symbol,” or a “capstone” to life and not a foundation (Cherlin, 2004, p. 156). My paper will mainly address people ages 20–29 who cohabit in America. Within this age group, 61% agreed that living with someone before marriage gives them a good taste of what it will be like when they do get married, and so they feel it is a good preparation for marriage (Kline et al., 2004).

A significant amount of research has been done on the differences between cohabitation and marriage. Researchers have found that most of the time cohabitation gives a false prediction of how successful the couple will be after marriage. They attribute this outcome to the evidence that cohabitation causes changes in attitudes about marital relationships, creating lower marital satisfaction. When a couple cohabits, the commitment level is only private, especially when compared to the public commitment of marriage, because they have not signed a legal document. Further research has been done on stability, quality, and satisfaction as well as the emotional and physical well-being of a cohabitating relationship. When a relationship is of high quality and the couple is satisfied with it, they are more likely to be happy.

Cohabitation is slowly becoming more acceptable to society (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). To young people, the meaning of marriage is changing (Carroll et al., 2007). Bumpass and Lu have said that “cohabitation and unmarried childbearing have dramatically altered family life in the United



States. . . . Indeed, it is likely that the rapid spread of cohabitation both reflects and reinforces the declining significance of marriage as a family status, and as a life-course marker in our society” (as cited in Bumpass, 1995, p. 4). Commitment is disappearing when it comes to cohabitation (Cherlin, 2004, p. 858).

Even though cohabitation is more normal in this generation, it still has the same negative effects that were discovered half a century ago (Jose, O’Leary, & Moyer, 2010, p. 105). Society needs to become more aware of these effects since a large portion of the population is cohabiting. Researchers have noticed this shift occurring away from marriage and toward cohabitation. This shift is due to cohabitation becoming more and more accepted by society. For example, fewer cohabiting unions that are “trial marriages” are actually ending in marriage. In other words, the connection that made cohabitation seem much like marriage is weakening—such that only 33% now end in marriage within the first three years, significantly lower than several decades ago (Cherlin, 2004, p. 849–850). From these statistics we can see another reason why people should not cohabit: more and more people are becoming less likely to marry after cohabiting.

My paper will discuss why living with a partner before marriage is not beneficial and is actually a hindrance to the relationship. Living with a partner before marriage is not a good preparation for marriage because those relationships will most likely experience lower relationship quality, satisfaction, and stability, as well as lower physical and emotional well-being, than a couple who waits until after marriage to live together.

## Marriage

Jason Carroll, a professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, said during a class lecture, “People treat things differently when they are borrowing or renting something than when they are the actual responsible owners of it. Cohabitation is the same. It’s like how students treat the apartment that they rent. Even though they want new carpet, they are not going to pay for it; however, if they were the owners of a house they are a lot more likely to pay for it to be replaced.” Dr. Carroll’s analogy, given to a marriage preparation class, explains how the commitment level affects the quality and satisfaction of a relationship because the two are valued and approached completely differently.

## Major Problems

A root of most major problems in a cohabiting relationship is that cohabiting requires less commitment. This is because there is no legal document binding the couple together. There is no “enforceable trust” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 854). It is also easier to get out of a cohabiting relationship than it is to get out of marriage. The individuals do not have to divide their assets or pay child support and alimony if the couple only cohabits. However, when a couple begins living together at marriage, it allows the couple to invest in their partner from the beginning, like owning a home. At-marriage cohabitation also creates less fear of abandonment so the couple can make long-term plans that will benefit them in the long run. For example, one spouse might follow the other to graduate school because that is better for them both in the long run; however, if the couple only cohabits they may not choose to make such a commitment. Just like in the economy, greater investments bring greater returns (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Some people think that one main reason why couples should not cohabit before marriage is because their children experience less stability and greater disruption in their family, but there are many other reasons why children should be an important consideration when couples choose marriage and not cohabitation. However, stability, quality, and satisfaction as well as emotional and physical benefits are the most basic and fundamental reasons for not cohabiting. Discussing these reasons can demonstrate that children are affected, though we will not discuss this directly.

## Quality and Satisfaction

The emotional satisfaction that each spouse has is “an important criterion for marital success” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851). Jose, O’Leary, and Moyer (2010) conclude that “Marital quality is assessed by reported levels of satisfaction, adjustment or global level of ‘happiness’” (p. 106). Vandenberghe (2001) argues that cohabiting couples experience greater conflict, less stability, and lower levels of sexual satisfaction. In other words, the quality of a relationship can be a measure of how long the marriage will last.

Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009b) conducted an experiment that tested sexual satisfaction, friendship, and relationship satisfaction among couples as well as other areas. They found that the outcomes greatly depend on the commitment level. Though they do not outright encourage and support cohabitation, they conclude that if a couple does decide to cohabit,

after-engagement cohabitation is better than before-engagement cohabitation. They conclude this study by saying at-marriage cohabitation and after-engagement cohabitation are not very different statistically. But they do say there are better outcomes with the higher commitment level. The data show that the best outcomes come from the at-marriage cohabitation group. Even if after-engagement and at-marriage cohabitation are not significantly different statistically speaking, at-marriage cohabitation still had the best results.

Rhoades et al. (2009b) continue to explain this claim by saying that the most influential factor on determining marital success is the engagement status when a couple begins to cohabit. Therefore, they discourage cohabitation before engagement, saying that if a couple is going to cohabit before marriage anyway, they should do it after they are engaged. However, it is even better if a couple takes it one step further and waits until marriage to cohabit.

Kline et al. (2004) conducted a longitudinal study on three different types of cohabitation: before-engagement cohabitation, after-engagement cohabitation, and at-marriage cohabitation. They found that couples cohabiting at marriage, compared to those cohabiting after engagement, displayed even higher levels of the following:

- Problem-solving skills
- Support behaviors
- Interpersonal commitment
- Relationship quality
- Positive interactions

This means that couples who do not cohabit until they are married are able to solve problems more effectively, have more positive interactions with each other, and in turn have better quality in their relationships.

### *Comparing Studies*

Jose et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis about major cohabitation and marriage studies. From this research, they concluded that “cohabitation before marriage is modestly negatively associated with subsequent marital quality” (p. 112).

### *Consequences*

It has been speculated that poor marital quality may eventually lead to poor health. Marital conflict has been linked to poor immune function, which is thus followed by increased likelihood of illness (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Therefore, living with a partner before marriage is not a good preparation for marriage because there is a higher likelihood of poor health, worse marital quality, and lower satisfaction.

### **Stability**

Jose et al. (2010) define relationship stability as “whether the marriage has or has not dissolved at a specific point in time” (p. 106). According to Jose et al.’s meta-analysis and the research of many other scholars, an association has been found between nonmarital cohabitation and low marital stability (Carroll et al., 2007; Kline et al., 2004). Social scientists have speculated and come up with a few theories of why premarital cohabitation decreases relationship stability and why that in turn eventually decreases likelihood of marital success.

One prevailing theory is that marital success is not solely dependent on whether the couple cohabits before marriage or not; it is also due to the preexisting characteristics of the individuals. A second theory suggests that “cohabitators [already] begin with less favorable attitudes toward marriage and less negative attitudes toward divorce, but the more often and the longer people live together without marrying, the more negative their attitudes toward marriage become” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 46). Along with that, a couple may become casual with dating and therefore change their attitudes about marriage and relationships. This in turn “may lead to lower marital satisfaction” (Kline et al., 2004, p. 311). Many researchers agree with Kline et al. in concluding that “cohabitation may not be the best avenue for such a test” (p. 317). Some hypothesize that decreasing cohabitation can lower the divorce rate across the United States.

### *Inertia Theory*

This theory suggests that couples go into cohabitation because they are aware of relationship problems, are less committed to the relationship, and/or are less confident about the marriage working out. However, they slide into marriage because it is easier than breaking up; they have a constraint commitment (Kline et al., 2004).

Kline et al. hypothesized that there would be a significant difference between the couples who cohabited before engagement and those who waited until after they were engaged or married. They decided to separate cohabitation into three different categories because the previous research

indicated that the duration of premarital cohabitation was linked to marital instability. They wanted to see if the length of time living with a partner would be an influencing variable. Their hypothesis was supported; before-engagement cohabitation was highest among all three negative outcomes, including more psychological aggression and negative interactions. In other words, the less time a couple cohabits, the better the stability of their relationship. Given that at-marriage cohabitation is the least amount of time cohabiting, couples cohabiting at marriage will be more stable and less likely to divorce.

## Physical & Emotional

### *Physical Well-Being*

By supporting marriages, people are inadvertently disproving cohabitation. Vandenberghe (2001) and Waite and Gallagher (2000) state some of the benefits a husband and wife experience that unmarried couples do not, such as:

- Less illness and disease
- Quick recovery rates
- More financial success
- Healthier and longer lives
- Lower depression rates
- Higher general well-being, both physically and emotionally

Surprisingly, these benefits that married people receive do not necessarily extend to people who only cohabit. Cohabitation deprives couples of the benefits of marriage. It offers short-term gratification but has a long-term cost (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

### *Who Benefits*

Men benefit slightly more in physical health than women do in marriage; however, this does not mean that it is bad for women's health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). This common misconception that marriage is better for the man than the woman is taken out of context and misinterpreted. Men generally benefit more because they tend to start at a lower quality of life than women do before marriage, so men have more room for improvement. This could be because single men tend to be more promiscuous and involved with more risky behaviors than single women. But when men get

married, they tend to settle down and become more stable. In the end, once the man and woman are married, they end up at the same quality level. They are "equally committed, equally happy, and equally psychologically healthy" (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 173). Marriage is beneficial for both genders.

### *Theories*

How can all of these health benefits be attributed to a ring or a piece of paper? Many theories and studies have been conducted regarding this issue. For example, one psychology professor's theory stated that a constant companionship "lessens the chances of disease, assists in recovery, and offers motivation to stay alive and well"—the professor named it the "tranquilizing effect" (Vandenberghe, 2001, p. 30). The selection theory, however, is better known.

### *Selection Theory*

Some social scientists have speculated that the negative effects of cohabitation are just illusion and attribute them to the selection theory. The theory of selectivity suggests the probability that already healthy people are selected into marriage. In other words, the reason why married people are healthier and better off is because people that are healthier and better off are the ones who get married. It is generally accepted that this theory accounts for a portion of the cohabitation effect, which states that premarital cohabitation is a risk factor for lower marital quality and subsequent divorce. Thus, the selection theory may possibly explain why married people have better health. However, I do not believe this is always the case.

Selectivity is not the entire story (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). As previously discussed, men actually change their behaviors once they get married. The study by Rhoades et al. found that even though the differences between after-engagement and at-marriage cohabitation are small, they cannot be "accounted for . . . by variables (i.e., age, income, education, and religiousness) often associated with selection into cohabitation" (2009b, p. 107). Furthermore, they found that no matter what an individual's income, education, or religious views are, he or she is not more likely than others to marry or have a happier, healthier, or more stable marriage—only getting married produces these positive outcomes.

While researchers cannot obtain perfect statistics because they cannot randomly assign people to get married, they have conducted high-quality

research and have taken confounding variables into account and controlled them. In fact, they have found that “married [people] have lower death rates, even after taking initial health status into account” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 51–52). This means that if a person is sick before marriage, they actually live longer than their matched pair partner that did not marry. Therefore, marriage is mainly a causation effect, meaning marriage causes these positive outcomes. Consequently, marriage is better than cohabitation because it creates better physical well-being. These benefits should not be delayed by cohabiting first.

### Economic Factors

Partners in a marriage are better off financially compared to cohabitating couples. Studies have concluded that “economic strain is positively related to violence in relationships” (Hardie & Lucas, 2010, p. 1141). Generally speaking, money plays a very large role in reported conflict for most cohabitating unions and marital relationships, but money can also create a peace of mind if the couple is financially successful. Therefore, since couples that cohabit are statistically worse off financially, they may have an increase in financial stress, causing an increase in conflict that may lead to violence. In fact, it is known that cohabiting women, compared to women who date without cohabiting, are at a superior risk for physical violence (Kline et al., 2004). Therefore, not cohabiting may protect women from domestic violence (Waite & Gallagher, 2000) and decrease the likelihood of being forced into sexual relationships.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes

Measure	Before engagement		After engagement		At marriage		Effect size	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Before vs. after engagement	Before vs. at marriage
Psychological aggression	7.25	4.88	4.28	3.96	3.89	4.23	.69	.75
Self-reported negative interaction	1.56	0.35	1.38	0.29	1.36	0.28	.57	.71
Observed negative interaction	3.62	1.44	3.00	1.19	2.91	1.01	.47	.57
Observed positive interaction	3.97	1.18	3.87	1.17	4.35	1.14	<i>ns</i>	.32
Confidence	67.02	3.26	68.46	2.50	68.20	1.85	.41	.64
Relationship quality	120.92	14.92	129.18	10.84	132.11	11.76	.64	.84
Interpersonal commitment	87.61	6.48	88.95	6.15	90.84	5.70	<i>ns</i>	.51

Note. Effect sizes are Cohen's *d* values.

Table 1. Kline et al.'s summary of data from research

### Emotional Well-Being

Women who are cohabitating also tend to be less equal in the relationship, experience significantly higher levels of depression, and have greater

economic insecurity (Vandenberghe, 2001). These outcomes, along with financial limitations, are detrimental to emotional well-being.

Premarital cohabitation is connected with inferior emotional well-being compared to at-marriage cohabitation. As previously stated, at-marriage cohabitation has the most preferred outcomes, which is demonstrated in Table 1. The only place where at-marriage cohabitation falls short is at the individual's confidence level. Individual confidence was higher with after-engagement cohabitation than the other two groups. However, this is only a 0.26 difference. Kline et al. said it is not statistically significant because the overall difference between after-engagement cohabiters and at-marriage cohabiters is “minimal because both types of cohabiters had made a formal commitment to marry before cohabiting” (p. 312). On the other hand, even though they claim that there is not a significant difference between after-engagement cohabitation and at-marriage cohabitation, many other researchers suggest that there is a significant difference between the two. However, the consensus among researchers is that the greater the commitment, the greater the return of physical and emotional well-being. Since marriage has the greatest commitment level, marriage has the highest returns.

### Emotional Security

Another benefit of marriage that cohabitation does not bring is emotional security. When a couple is married, they know that their partner will always be there to take care of them if they cannot take care of themselves. However, if the couple just cohabits, they do not have this sense of security. This is in part because there is no constraint commitment (as previously mentioned), so either partner can theoretically leave at any time with minimal strings attached. Studies indicate that because married people always have someone to talk to in times of need, they tend to have lower heart rates and other fight-or-flight responses. In this way, spouses offer each other a “social insurance” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, pp. 46–58). Therefore, married couples start off on better footing and form correct habits if they do not cohabit before marriage. Furthermore, married couples have lower stress levels and higher emotional security compared to premarital cohabitating relationships.

Another reason that cohabiting at marriage is best is because individuals can experience greater symptoms of depression and anxiety. Rhoades et al. said that when a couple cohabits to test out their relationship the “individual[s]

well-being . . . [reported] greater depressive and anxiety symptoms as well as attachment-related concerns.” This is because the couple cannot effectively trust each other, so they experience insecurity and in return have anxiety about abandonment (2009a, p. 252). Once again, this is because there is no constraint commitment. Kline et al. (2004) said noncommittal cohabitation exhibited the highest risk for relationship distress that would not likely diminish after marriage. It is true that once a cohabitating union marries they will have a decrease in these symptoms. For the marriage to be successful, however, the couple will have to be cautious and completely change their commitment level, along with their mental and emotional states, which is not easy. Individuals that wait to cohabit until marriage begin their new way of life having a greater foundation of trust and in turn do not exhibit as much depression and anxiety as cohabitating unions.

## Conclusion

Couples that marry before cohabitating have superior health, financial stability, and emotional benefits than couples that cohabit before marriage. Both the man and the woman benefit more from at-marriage cohabitation than any other form of cohabitation. Researchers have shown that marriage benefits are not only due to selectivity but also because marriage creates healthier people—a number of these benefits, like living longer, do not extend to cohabitating unions. Furthermore, since cohabitation generally leads to lower relationship quality, satisfaction, stability, and emotional and physical well-being, cohabitation is not a good preparation for marriage. The significance of these negative outcomes is why people should not cohabit before marriage. If a couple is in a cohabiting relationship, they should be intentional about their decision to marry and not just slide into marriage. Commitment level plays a major role in the outcomes cohabitation brings. Decreasing the prevalence of cohabitation and being more intentional about marriage could in turn lower the divorce rate across the United States and thus keep families as the glue of society.

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