



Abstinence & Marriage: A Clear Link

A 2008 study by Dr. Bradford Wilcox, Ph.D., entitled, *“A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs,”* provides clear and compelling research which supports the central thesis behind A&M Partnership: namely that abstinence is not merely about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but more significantly it is about helping teens prepare for a future marriage and family. The study further argues that abstinence is a necessary social norm for the overall health and well being of the nation. The following excerpt is from: W. Bradford Wilcox, Ph.D., *“A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs.”*

Abstinence before marriage is linked to stronger and more satisfying families, according to a growing body of research. Specifically, adolescents and adults who abstain from sex before marriage are more likely to enjoy better family relationships, and are also more likely to provide a good family life to any children that they bring into the world. Furthermore, research on the collective consequences of the sexual revolution for families in the United States and Europe strongly suggests that a social norm of abstinence until marriage is likely to improve the strength of marriage and family life in the United States.

Abstinence before marriage appears to increase solidarity between adolescents and their parents, and between married spouses. As noted above, adolescents who have sex as teenagers, especially at early ages, are significantly more likely than virgins to distance themselves from their parents, both by rejecting their parents’ norms and by spending less time with them.²⁶ By contrast, virgins are more likely to maintain close ties with their parents, and to abide by their values.²⁷

When it comes to marriage, adults who succeed in reserving sex and a shared domicile for marriage are more likely to enjoy happy and stable marriages. By contrast, couples who have sex before marriage, especially couples who cohabit, are more likely to experience difficulties

in their marriage.²⁸ For instance, one study of 2,034 married adults found that those who had cohabited prior to marriage reported less marital happiness and more marital conflict, compared to similar couples who did not cohabit.²⁹ Abstinence before marriage is also linked to greater marital stability. For instance, studies almost always find that cohabitation is associated with an increased divorce risk, with estimates ranging from as low as a 33 percent increased divorce risk to a 151 percent increased risk of dissolution.³⁰ Studies also indicate that men and women who marry as virgins are significantly less likely to divorce.³¹ For instance, a study relying on the National Health and Social Life Survey found that men who marry as virgins are 37 percent less likely to divorce than other men, and that women who marry as virgins are 24 percent less likely to divorce than other women.³² Thus, adults who remain abstinent until marriage are more likely to enjoy a satisfying and stable marriage.

What accounts for the links between premarital sex and marital difficulties? University of Chicago sociologist Edward Laumann and his colleagues suggest that people who acquire a taste for sexual activity at an early age, and who have multiple partners, are less likely “to be sexually exclusive over the remainder of their life, with the result that divorce is a more likely outcome for them.”³³ Cohabitation and premarital sex have also been linked to a shift towards more

individualistic and less marriage oriented norms and values. That is, the experience of engaging in sex or cohabitation seems to make persons more likely to adopt attitudes that place a priority on individual expression and de-emphasize the value of marriage and marital permanency; in turn, such individuals are more likely to adopt beliefs and behaviors that are incompatible with interdependent marital roles, and they are less likely to invest in their marriages.³⁴

Children born to unmarried mothers are significantly more likely than children born to married parents to suffer from poverty, physical and sexual abuse and neglect, psychological problems such as depression, delinquency and criminal activity, and educational failure.³⁶ For instance, one study found that boys raised outside of an intact, married home were 2 to 3 times more likely to end up in prison as young adults.³⁷ Another study found that children raised in single-parent families are about twice as likely to drop out of high school and to have a teenage pregnancy later in life.³⁸ After surveying the literature on family structure, Penn State sociologist Paul Amato concluded, “Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood.”³⁹

Of course, over the last 40 years, more children have been born and reared outside a married home at least in part because the sexual revolution undercut the norm of premarital sexual abstinence. Most scholars who have studied the nation’s recent retreat from marriage over the last four decades agree that the sexual revolution played an important role in fueling this retreat.⁴⁰ Dr. George Akerlof, a Nobel-prize-

winning economist at the University of California-Berkeley, is particularly perceptive in this regard. In two different studies, he argues that the sexual revolution—aided in part by widespread contraception—fueled a dramatic increase in premarital sex, and reduced the normative imperative that men should take responsibility for the children they help bring into the world by marrying; these two developments, in turn, led to dramatic increases in non-marital childbearing.⁴¹ From this research, Dr. Akerlof concludes that the sexual revolution played an important role in the nation’s retreat from marriage over the last four decades, and is indirectly responsible for the social consequences of that retreat. In his words: “Just at the time, about 1970, that the permanent cure to poverty seemed to be on the horizon and just at the time that women had obtained the tools to control the number and timing of their children, single motherhood and the feminization of poverty began their long and steady rise.”⁴² Furthermore, he thinks the retreat from marriage caused in part by the sexual revolution was also implicated in the “crime shock and the substance abuse shock” of the 1970s and 1980s.⁴³ Indeed, a number of other studies find that the retreat from marriage is strongly linked to increases in child poverty, crime, and substance abuse since the 1960s.⁴⁴ The bottom line is this: the erosion of the norm of premarital sexual abstinence, both in belief and behavior, appears to have played an important role in the weakening of American family life and, in turn, some of the nation’s most pressing social problems.

Thus, the norm that sex should be reserved for marriage would seem to increase the likelihood that any individual could enjoy a strong and satisfying family life; furthermore, increased public support for such a norm would also seem likely to foster happier and healthier families in the United States as a whole.

W. Bradford Wilcox, Ph.D., *A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs, Technical Assistance Module for Abstinence Education Grantees*. Arlington, VA. Pal-Tech, Inc., February 2008. pp. 6-8. Notes embedded within the excerpt are available in the full report which is available at www.ampartnership.org.

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