



The National Marriage Project

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New Report: Mix of Traditional and Contemporary Values Linked To Married Parents' Happiness

December 8, 2011 — Raising kids is a challenge, from the stresses of sleepless nights and toddler tantrums to teenage sullenness. Plenty of research has found that the arrival of a baby is associated with declines in self-reported happiness and marital satisfaction for many, and increases in depression for some. However, more than one-third of married couples continue to thrive even after a baby comes along.

What accounts for their success? According to a new "State of Our Unions" report from the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, in partnership with the Center for Marriage and Families, 10 aspects of contemporary social life and relationships – from sexual satisfaction to marital generosity to religious faith to shared housework – boost the odds of successfully combining marriage and parenthood.

The 2011 issue of "The State of Our Unions" is titled "When Baby Makes Three – How Parenthood Makes Life Meaningful and How Marriage Makes Parenthood Bearable." Based on a new survey of 2,870 married men and women (ages 18-46), it examines the critical link between parenthood and marriage. The report is co-authored by W. Bradford Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology in the U.Va. College of Arts & Sciences and director of the National Marriage Project, and Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families.

The 10 key factors linked to increased odds of successfully combining marriage and parenthood include a mix of newer and more traditional values, the report explains. Factors more closely aligned and associated with the newer, "soul-mate model of marriage" include shared housework, good sex, marital generosity, date nights, and having a college degree. Factors more closely aligned and associated with the older, "institutional model of marriage" include shared religious faith, commitment, the support of friends and family, a sound economic foundation provided by a good job, and quality family time.

Taken together, these 10 factors suggest "a hybrid model of married life appears to be the best path to successfully combine marriage and parenthood for today's parents," said Wilcox, the report's lead author.

"These success factors form a roadmap of practical strategies that young couples can adopt to help their marriage thrive when they find themselves new parents," he said.

Co-author Marquardt said, "One of the striking findings of this report is that equality in shared housework has emerged as a predictor of marital success for today's young married parents, even as most married mothers would prefer to work part time and most married fathers would prefer to work full time."

In the 1960s and 1970s, many husbands and wives took a more individualistic approach to marriage, Wilcox said. "But that didn't work out so well, as illustrated by the divorce revolution. By contrast, this report finds that in today's marriage both wives and husbands benefit when they embrace an ethic of marital generosity," he said. "That means making regular efforts to serve their spouse in small ways – from making them a cup of coffee to giving them a back rub after a long day to going out of their way to be affectionate or forgiving."

Other major findings of the report:

- Parenting is easier for partners. Married parents report more global happiness and less depression than single parents in contrast to a recent spate of films, books and magazine stories about the joys of conceiving and rearing a baby alone. Cohabiting couples fall in between.
- Married parents experience more meaning in their lives than their childless peers, and a substantial minority of married parents are "very happy" in their marriages. Married men and women are markedly more likely to report that they find life meaningful compared with their childless peers. A substantial minority of husbands (35 percent) and wives (37 percent) do *not* experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness.
- Surprisingly, the happiest married parents have four or more kids: they are about as happy as married couples with no children, and at least 40 percent more likely to be happily married than the parents with one, two or three kids. It appears that this is a case of selection: Particular types of couples end up having large numbers of children, remain married to one another, and also enjoy cultural, social, and relational strengths that more than offset the challenges of parenting a large family.

The report presents results from a new, nationally representative survey of more than 1,400 heterosexual married couples between the ages of 18 and 46, "The Survey of Marital Generosity," conducted by Knowledge Networks in December of 2010 and January of 2011 and funded by the Science of Generosity initiative at the University of Notre Dame. It also includes new analyses of nationally representative data from the General Social Survey and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The report responds to three questions: Is it emotionally easier to parent alone in a world in which a good marriage seems increasingly out of reach? Is parenthood itself an obstacle to a good marriage? What are the social, cultural, and relational sources of marital success among today's parents?

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About the National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative based at the University of Virginia and founded in 1997 at Rutgers University. Its mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies that increase marital quality and stability. The NMP is directed by W. Bradford Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology at U.Va. Project publications include the annual "State of Our Unions" report.

About the Center for Marriage and Families

The center, directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, is part of the Institute for American Values, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. The center's mission is to increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents.

Editors: For information about this report or to schedule an interview with W. Bradford Wilcox or Elizabeth Marquardt, contact Brevy Cannon at 434-243-0368 or brevy@virginia.edu.

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