



FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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Date: August 7, 2009
To: FOF Team
Re: **Good News: Young Adults Deeply Desire Marriage and Family**

Young Adults Consistently Express Marriage and Family as Important Life Goal

Cohabitation and unmarried child-bearing by women in their 20s and 30s have been the huge growth areas in family formation over the past ten years in Western nations, and marriage rates continue to plummet. But how is marriage faring in terms of young people's *attitudes* and *life dreams*?

The answer to this question is a good-news story and carves out an exciting challenge and opportunity for Focus on the Family's work, both domestically and internationally.

This good-news derives from a number of strong and diverse research studies coming to very similar conclusions.

A) Child Trends, a non-partisan research firm in Washington DC, released a July 2009 report revealing that 83% of young adults say that being married someday is a "very important" or "important" life goal. Only 5% said marrying was unimportant to them.

However, a key point is *when* they want to marry. Only 26 percent of these young adults said they wanted to be married "now," while 17 percent were neutral and 57 percent said sometime later.¹

B) Initial findings from the *World Family Map Project*, a cooperative research project between the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, University of Virginia and Child Trends found that over three quarters of the world's adults believe marriage is an important and relevant institution.²

C) An MTV/Associated Press survey received a great deal of media attention two years ago for its seemingly surprising findings that young people said their families were their primary source of happiness, followed by spending time with friends or a significant other. Nearly no one mentioned money as a source of happiness. And regarding their view of sexual relationships, the young people that were sexually active said it actually "leads to less happiness" according to 13 to 17 year-olds and 18 to 24 year-olds said it leads to "more happiness in the moment, but not in general."³

D) The London School of Economics reported a top life-desire for young adults in the UK was for a happy marriage and family, with almost a third of women citing it as their childhood dream. Nearly one in five men said it was their top choice as well.⁴

E) Since 1976, the nationally representative *Monitoring the Future* survey has been tracking the attitudes of high school students on a host of life-course topics. They found that 82 percent of high school girls and 70 percent of boys indicated that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them in 2005, up a few percentage points for both girls and boys from 1976-1980.

F) The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University observed that after decades of dramatic growth in young people's *approval* of cohabitation, 2001-2005 saw its first *decline* in boys and girls "agreeing" or "mostly agreeing" that "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married" in order to test compatibility."⁵

G) The Institute for Social Research and the University of Michigan conducted a survey examining four decades of family attitude trends in the U.S., drawing from five large-scale, nationally representative data sets. They report that for all the





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change seen in social values and family trends, “there is very little evidence that the *commitment* of Americans to children, marriage and family life has eroded substantially in the past two decades.”

In fact, “as compared to the 1970s, young Americans in the 1990s were more committed to the importance of a good marriage and family life” and that parenthood is viewed by young people today as more fulfilling than it was three decades ago.⁶

Their article’s conclusion is pointed:

A very important (constant finding) to note is the strong emphasis and commitment given to marriage, children and family life in America today. Both young and old Americans place great emphasis on marriage and children and *plan* to devote much of their lives to children and spouses. This can be seen in the overwhelming importance that young people place on the significance of a good marriage and family life.

And this importance can be seen in the personal *expectations* of young people. They continue:

The great majority of young people are both planning and expecting marriage. Americans overwhelmingly believe that marriage is a lifetime relationship that should not be terminated except under extreme circumstances. Young people today are also approaching the marriage decision with the expectation that they will stay married to the same person until death intervenes. Only a small fraction of young Americans believe that a good marriage and family life are not important, prefer not to have a mate, believe they will not marry, or believe that it is unlikely that they will stay married to their spouse for a lifetime. [T]he overwhelming majority of young people believe that it is likely that they will want to have children if they get married. Only a modest fraction believe that motherhood and fatherhood are not fulfilling...⁷

The expectation of marrying for young people does differ significantly among racial lines. Asians have the greatest expectation to marry, followed by Whites and Blacks being consistently the lowest. Hispanic youth are just below Whites.⁸

Conclusions for Focus on the Family’s Work

Imagine a consultant coming to analyze our work in relation to the larger market. He would ask a few preliminary questions:

- 1) *What is it that you do?* Our mission is to help families thrive.
- 2) *How many people have these families?* Pretty much everyone!
- 3) *How deep is their felt need for this?* Well, research indicates it is consistently one of their strongest desires.
- 3) *How many key competitors dominate your market?* No one really.

We know what we do. There is a massive market. The felt need is dramatically deep. The market is nearly competition free. How would this consultant then appraise our opportunities in the market?

- Are we concluding the same thing?
- Are we as optimistic as he might be?
- Are we seizing the opportunities expressed here?

¹ Mindy E. Scott, *et al.*, “Young Adults Attitudes About Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, But Expectations Remain High,” *Child Trends Research Brief*, Publication #2009-30 (July 2009) p. 4-5.

² W. Bradford Wilcox, Laura Lippman and Camille Whitney, *World Family Map Project*, (Child Trends/IMFC: Summer 2009), p. 9-11.

³ “What Makes Kids Happy Will Surprise You,” *The Associated Press*, August 20, 2007

⁴ Colin Fernandez, “Forget Astronaut Dreams, Most Kids Just Want a Happy Marriage,” *Daily Mail*, Sept. 10, 2007.

⁵ David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, “The State of Our Unions 2007: The Social Health of Marriage in America,” *The National Marriage Project*, (Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey, July 2007), p. 27.

⁶ Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, “Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States: The 1960s Through the 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2001) 63:1009-1037, p. 1030.

⁷ Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001, p. 1030.

⁸ Sarah R. Crissey, “Race/Ethnic Differences in the Marital Expectations of Adolescents: The Role of Romantic Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67 (2005): 697-709; Scott, *et al.*, 2009, p. 5.