

Healthy Marriages, Healthy Society



*Research on the Alignment
of Marital Outcomes,
Marriage Education and
Key Social Concerns*



In 1996, Congress made the following findings:

- Marriage is the foundation of a successful society.
- Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children.

Health and Human Services—Administration for Children and Families
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#ms>

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“Each year, family fragmentation costs American taxpayers at least \$112 billion dollars. These costs are recurring—that is, they are incurred each and every year—meaning that the decline of marriage costs American taxpayers more than \$1 trillion dollars over a decade...Reducing these costs is a legitimate concern of government, policymakers, and legislators.”

The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States. Institute for American Values, 2008, pp. 20.

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“...Finally, preliminary research shows that marriage education workshops can make a real difference in helping married couples stay together and in encouraging unmarried couples who are living together to form a more lasting bond. Expanding access to such services... should be something everybody can agree on...”

Barack Obama, *Audacity of Hope*, 2006, p.334

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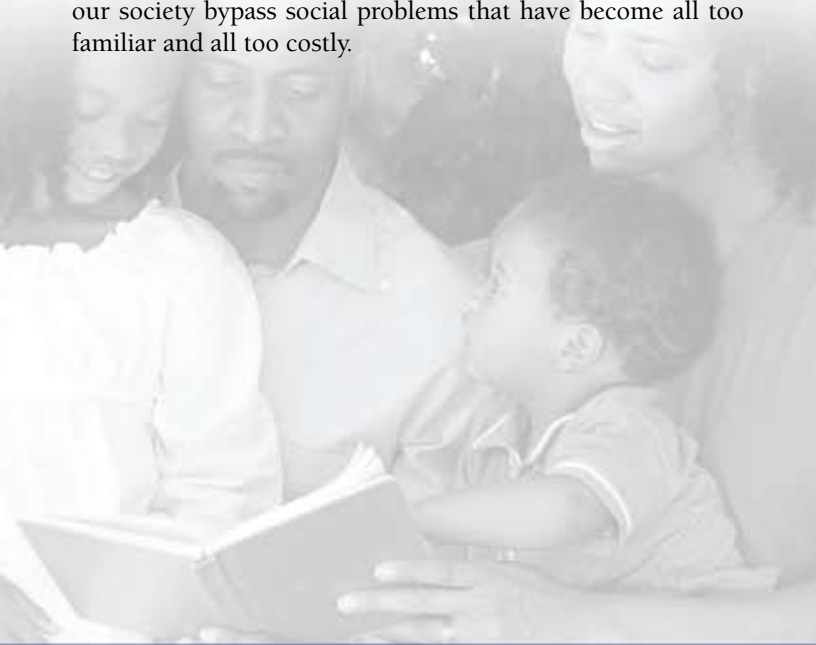
Introduction

Research from across many social science disciplines draws an inescapable connection between marital success and failure and numerous social outcomes of great significance.

With divorces lingering at nearly 50% throughout society, and each divorce generating a significant social services burden on State and Federal governments, it is clear that marital outcomes are critical to the overall stability of American society.

Affecting children, affecting community, affecting society at large, marital outcomes in the aggregate shape the warp and woof of our culture, a culture that has become unnecessarily frayed as a result of two widespread types of ignorance: Ignorance about the factors that are known to predict marital success or failure and ignorance about the correlation between Marriage Education and marital outcomes.

This document overviews how “Healthy Marriages” as a social cause aligns with several well-known and traditionally-funded reparative endeavors. These data are presented to help organizations from all sectors recognize the powerful preventive leverage that Marriage Education presents to help our society bypass social problems that have become all too familiar and all too costly.





Although the size and context of the referenced studies differ, the weight of evidence supports the difference that marital outcomes make in the following areas...

Child Abuse/Sexual Trauma

- A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk for child abuse.¹
- Compared with their counterparts living with both parents, children in single-parent families had a 77% greater risk of being harmed by physical abuse, a 63% greater risk of experiencing any countable physical abuse, an 87% greater risk of being harmed by physical neglect, a 165% greater risk of experiencing any countable physical neglect, a 74% greater risk of being harmed by emotional neglect, a 64% greater risk of experiencing any countable emotional neglect; a 220% greater risk of being educationally neglected, an approximately 80% greater risk of suffering serious injury or harm from abuse or neglect, an approximately 90% greater risk of receiving moderate injury or harm as a result of child maltreatment; and a 120% greater risk of being endangered by some type of child abuse or neglect.²
- British data show that the lowest level of serious abuse occurs in the always-intact married family; stepfamily abuse levels are six times higher; always-single mother family abuse levels are 14 times higher; cohabiting family, 20 times higher, and the single-father family, 20 times higher. The most dangerous family structure is when the mother cohabits with a boyfriend who is not the father of the child, where the abuse rate was found to be 33 times greater than in the intact married family.³

- The probability of marital disruption is higher among people who during childhood have experienced physical abuse, rape or serious physical attack or assault.⁴
- Fatal abuse of children of all ages occurs 3x more frequently in stepfamilies than in intact married families.⁵
- When parents divorce, most children suffer; for some, this suffering turns into long-lasting psychological damage. Neglect of children, which can be psychologically more damaging than physical abuse,⁶ is twice as high among separated and divorced parents.⁷
- Not only do higher levels of divorce accompany higher levels of child abuse, but remarriage does not reduce the level of child abuse and may even add to it.⁸
- The rate of sexual abuse of girls by their stepfathers is at least 6x higher,⁹ and may be as much as 40x greater,¹⁰ than sexual abuse of daughters by their biological fathers who remain in intact families.
- Children two years of age and younger are 70-100x more likely to be killed at the hands of their stepparents than by their biological parents. Infants, because of their small size, are even more vulnerable.¹¹

Children's Achievement

- Children from divorced homes perform more poorly in reading, spelling and math and repeat a grade more frequently than children from intact two-parent families;¹² Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (n = 11,519) showed children in families with their married, biological parents to have, on average, higher reading achievement scores than peers living with cohabiting parents or in stepfamilies, even when parents' education, family income and poverty status are taken into account.¹³



- The absence of the father lowers cognitive test scores for young children in general, especially the math scores of daughters.¹⁵ By age 13, there is an average difference of ½ year in reading abilities between children of divorced parents and those who have intact families.¹⁶
- Children from one-parent families do less well than their peers on test scores, expectations about college, grades, and school attendance.¹⁷
- Children aged 3 to 12 in families with married, biological parents performed, on average, better on a mathematical calculation test than peers in families with a biological mother and a stepfather, families with an unmarried biological mother and a cohabiting partner, or families with a biological father only.¹⁸
- Children from single-parent homes demonstrate higher rates of absenteeism and truancy, have lower achievement scores, and higher drop-out rates than those from two-parent families;¹⁹ 86% of children of divorce demonstrate lowered academic achievement.²⁰
- In data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (N= 6,954), in comparison with individuals from intact families, those living with divorced single parents or in stepfamilies at age 14 and (who) did not experience any (additional) changes in their family situation during late adolescence...had, on average, lower levels of education attainment, lower annual earnings, and less prestigious occupations at age 26.²¹ Those living with divorced single parents or in stepfamilies at age 14 but (which also) experienced (additional) changes in their family situation during late adolescence reported, on average, worse outcomes on college attendance, educational attainment, income, poverty status, and occupational prestige. The negative effects of living in non-intact families that experienced family transitions during late adolescence appeared to be twice as large as... those that did not undergo any (additional) family structure changes during late adolescence."²²





- French data show a link between parental separation and children's academic achievement, regardless of other background factors; parental separation shortens the child's total time in education by an average of 6 months to more than a year.²³
- High school drop-out rates are much higher among children of divorced parents than among children of always-married parents;²⁴ The college attendance rate is about 60% lower among children of divorced parents compared with children of intact families.²⁵
- Numerous studies on the effects of divorce on children show lesser educational attainment as one of the long-term effects;²⁶ Single parenthood increases the risk of dropping out of high school by 150% for the average white child, 100% for the average Latino child, and 80% by the average black child; one-third of the total high school dropout rate in the U.S. may be caused by family break-ups (about 6% of the 19% total dropout rate, even higher if GEDs are excluded.)²⁷
- Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement Study to estimate how parents' marital dissolution influences changes in adolescents' mathematics course work, overall grade point average and course failure rates suggest that associations found between marital dissolution and their children's academic achievement may be causal, regardless of data analysis methods used.²⁸
- Data from a 20-year longitudinal study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course (n = 2,033) found that divorce in the first generation is associated with lower education in generations 2 and 3; having grandparents who divorced is associated with a lower level of educational attainment and a greater likelihood of marital discord. This association holds even if the grandparents' divorce occurred before the birth of the grandchild.²⁹



Domestic Violence/Sexual Violence

- Married women with children suffer far less abuse than single mothers. The rate of spousal, boyfriend, or domestic partner abuse is 2x as high among mothers who have never been married than it is among mothers who have ever married (including those separated or divorced.)³⁰
- The victimization rate for women separated from their husbands is about 25x higher than that of married women.³¹
- Canadian data found that separated women reported nine times the prevalence of violence, and divorced women reported about four times the prevalence of violence compared with married women.³²
- Compared to female respondents ages 18-28 (n = 3,295) in cohabiting relationships, married peers were 1/3 less likely to report being victims of relationship violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, controlling for relationship quality and duration, education level of respondents and their partners, employment status, income, presence of children in the home, race, age, family of origin factors, and religiosity. Compared to young adult female respondents in cohabiting relationships, married peers were also 50% less likely to report perpetrating relationship violence, controlling for the same set of factors.³³
- Husbands commit about 5% of all rapes against women, compared to 21% by ex-spouses, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends.³⁴ “A large body of research shows ... that marriage is much less dangerous for women than cohabitation.”³⁵

Mental & Physical Health

(See also “Healthy Marriages, Healthy Lives.”³⁶)

- A comprehensive review of research since 1990 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that “married people are healthier than those who are not married across a wide array of health outcomes... Most researchers conclude that the association between marriage and health represents a combination of selection and protection.”³⁷
- “A burgeoning literature suggests that marriage may have a wide range of benefits, including improvements to individuals’ economic well-being mental and physical health, and the well-being of their children... A focus on the most rigorous recent evidence reveals that marriage has positive effects on certain health-related outcomes.”³⁸
- Many links between marriage and better health in children and adults “have been documented in hundreds of quantitative studies covering different time periods and different countries.”³⁹
- Virtually every study of mortality and marital status shows the unmarried of both sexes have higher death rates, whether by accident, disease, or self-inflicted wounds, and this is found in every country that maintains accurate health statistics.”⁴⁰
- A review of 130 empirical studies...about the relationship between marriage and well-being found “an intimate link between marital status and personal well-being.”⁴¹
- An unhappy marriage can increase the chance of illness by 35% and shorten life by four years; happily married people live longer, healthier lives than divorced or unhappily married couples; non-married women have 50% higher mortality rate than married women; non-married men have 250% higher mortality rate than married men.⁴²



- “Marriage is associated with benefits for health and well-being, but also...that such advantages depend, in part, on marital quality.”⁴³
- Women who reported “keeping their mouths shut” during conflict with their spouse—an indication of resentment over buried issues—had 4x the risk of dying from heart disease over a 10-year follow up study.⁴⁴
- Couples in conflict-ridden marriages take longer than the happily married to heal from all kinds of wounds.⁴⁵
- Children who experience a parental divorce have their life expectancy shorted by an average of four years, according to a 50-year longitudinal study—effects comparable to cigarette smoking.⁴⁶
- Health effects during childhood from divorced families include a doubling of the risk of asthma and a significant increase in injury rate.⁴⁷
- Girls with divorced parents are at particularly high risk to develop depressive symptoms during adolescence.⁴⁸
- Data from the National Health Interview Survey (n = 80,018) found that over the course of eight years, the odds of mortality were 58 percent higher for never-married individuals, 27 percent for divorced/separated individuals, and 39 percent for widowed individuals, compared to married individuals.⁴⁹
- Consequential to the stresses associated with marital conflict and disruption are offspring deficits in affective, behavioral and cognitive domains. These deficits appear to increase health risk through poor health behaviors and by altering physiological stress-response systems, including neuroendocrine, cardiovascular and neurotransmitter functioning. It appears that there is a cost of marital conflict and disruption to children’s health.⁵⁰
- The National Surveys of Children, a major longitudinal Federal study done in three waves, found that parental divorce was associated with higher incidence of several mental health problems in children: depression, withdrawal from friends and family; aggressive, impulsive, or hyperactive behavior; and either withdrawing from participation in the classroom or becoming disruptive.⁵¹





Addiction

- Children who use drugs and abuse alcohol are more likely to come from family backgrounds characterized by parental conflict and parental rejection, and because divorce increases these factors, it increases the likelihood that children will abuse alcohol and begin using drugs.⁵²
- Drug use in children is lowest in intact married families;⁵³ After controlling for age and gender, adolescents living in single-parent family structures were more likely to report having engaged in use of illegal drugs when compared to those living in non-divorced, two biological parent families.⁵⁴
- Marriage reduced binge drinking by 10% and the frequency of such drinking episodes by 11% for men, and reduced the proportion of women who reported binge drinking behavior by 20%, in the first two years surrounding marriage.⁵⁵




- Exposure to interparental conflict significantly increases the odds of experiencing a subsequent episode of major depressive disorder as well as alcohol abuse or dependency disorder.⁵⁶
- Data from 8,613 adults at a California primary care clinic found traumatic childhood experiences—including physical or emotional neglect, domestic violence, and parental separation and divorce—to increase the likelihood of drug initiation from early adolescence into adulthood, as well as the incidence of drug use, addiction, and intravenous drug use. Compared with peers from intact families, teens whose parents had divorced were almost four times more likely to use illicit drugs by age 14 and almost twice as likely to use illicit drugs during their lives.⁵⁷
- Data from 2,011 adolescents averaging 14 years of age, found that teens in blended or divorced single-parent families, in comparison with those in intact families, tended to have higher levels of behavioral problems that included using tobacco, beer or wine, hard liquor and/or marijuana, binge drinking, carrying a weapons, physical fighting, and/or engaging in sexual activity. This was true controlling for age, gender, race, maternal educational attainment, parental support and monitoring, peer and neighbor support, and school attachment.⁵⁸
- Youths who lived with a divorced parent, whether single or remarried, were more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, carrying a weapon, fighting, and sexual activities. This family structure effect remained even after controlling for demographic, parenting style, and community factors.⁵⁹

Premarital Sex/Unwed Births

- The rate of virginity among teenagers at all ages is highly correlated with the presence or absence of married parents.⁶⁰


- Children who grow up in single-parent homes are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and more likely to have children outside of wedlock.⁶¹
- Women raised in female-headed families are 53% likelier to have teenage marriages, 111% likelier to have teenage births, 164% likelier to have premarital births, 93% likelier to experience marital disruptions.⁶² For white adolescent women, the number of family changes (parental divorce, remarriage, etc.) experienced during childhood and adolescence was significantly related to the likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse. Those that reported multiple family transitions were more likely to report having engaged in non-marital sexual intercourse.⁶³
- Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health on sexually active teens who have had at least two sexual partners (n = 1,468), male adolescents living with both biological or adoptive parents were 64% more likely to always use contraception when compared to similar males who did not live with both parents.⁶⁴
- Young women ages 13-19 that have ever lived with a single, solo parent have a greater risk of having a premarital teen pregnancy than young women that have never lived with a single, solo parent.⁶⁵
- Among African American adolescent females, those living with a cohabiting parent had more than three times the odds of engaging in sexual activity when compared to adolescents living with married parents. Those living with a single parent as a result of marital disruption faced 2.8 times the odds of engaging in sexual activity, relative to those living with married parents.⁶⁶





“Taxpayers in California incur the highest state and local costs for family fragmentation, estimated at \$4.8 billion per year.” This figure represents a “lower-bound” or minimum estimate.

The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing. 2008.
New York: Institute for American Values, pg. 5, 38.
<http://center.americanvalues.org/?p=74>

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is sitting on a white blanket on a grassy field. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a dark blue top and light blue jeans. She is smiling and looking down towards a child whose legs and feet are visible in the foreground. The child is wearing blue shorts and black sneakers. The background is a bright, sunlit grassy area.

“With divorces lingering at nearly 50%, and each divorce generating a social services burden conservatively estimated at \$30,000 per divorce, marital outcomes are critical to the overall stability of American society. Marital outcomes impact the couple, their children, their community, and the culture we live in.”

Schramm, David G. “Individual and Social Costs of Divorce in Utah”, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, Vol. 27(1) 133-146 (2006).

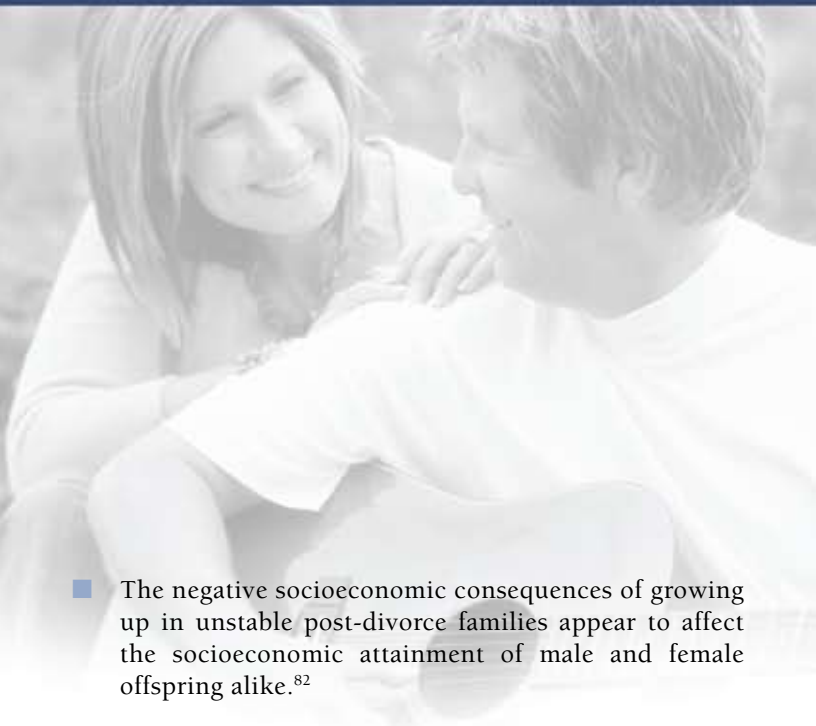
- Among a sample of adolescent virgins, those who reported living with two married parents were roughly 40 percent less likely to engage in sexual activity before the follow-up interview approximately a year later than adolescents who were not living with two married parents.⁶⁷
- Using a research design to separate the mechanisms responsible for the association between parental divorce and offspring well-being, researchers attribute to divorce a causal role in children's earlier initiation of sexual intercourse.⁶⁸
- Among teenage boys who father an illegitimate child, almost 30% come from single-parent households, twice as many as from teen boys who come from two-parent families.⁶⁹
- In surveying 3,828 adolescents ages 14-16, those living with their biological father and mother were 2.4 times less likely to be sexually active than those living with their mother and her cohabiting partner, 1.7 times less likely to be active than those living with a never married single mother, 1.8 times those living with a divorced or separated single mother, and 1.9 times those living with a stepfather after parental divorce.⁷⁰
- Women who experience changes in their caretaking situation during childhood (e.g., parental divorce, remarriage, mother's partner moves in, etc.) are significantly more likely to have an early pregnancy. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth (n = 10,141) found that females experiencing such a childhood transition were 1.7 times more likely to have a pregnancy during adolescence, those experiencing two transitions were 3.13 times more likely to become pregnant as an adolescent, and those experiencing 3 or more transitions were 5.73 times more likely to have an adolescent pregnancy than cohorts experiencing no changes in their caretaking situation during childhood.⁷¹





Poverty

- Almost 50% of households with children undergoing divorce move into poverty following the divorce.⁷²
- 40% of families on TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, formerly called Welfare) are divorced or separated single-parent households.⁷³
- Divorce increases the likelihood that a family will become economically distressed, with single-parent families constituting more than 73% of the lowest income quintile.⁷⁴
- Almost half of American families experience poverty following a divorce;⁷⁵ household income of a child's family was found to drop an average of 42% following divorce.⁷⁶
- 75% of all women who apply for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or disrupted relationship in which they live with a male outside of marriage.⁷⁷
- Because divorce leads to decreased household income and higher risk of poverty, it affects a child's level of academic achievement, which translates into lower earnings as an adult.⁷⁸
- In "plausible" matching scenarios between single mothers and single males of the same race and similar in age and education levels, such theoretical marriages occurring would reduce poverty 80% among these single-mother households;⁷⁹ other researchers using a similar approach concluded that such marriages would reduce poverty among single mothers by about 65%.⁸⁰
- Analyses on the impact of marriage on poverty rates under conditions where the proportion of households in different family structures remain constant over time ("share-shift" analyses) reveal that over 80% of poverty is related to changes in family structure such as increase in households headed by single mothers.⁸¹



- The negative socioeconomic consequences of growing up in unstable post-divorce families appear to affect the socioeconomic attainment of male and female offspring alike.⁸²
- Divorce diminishes the potential of every member of the household to accumulate wealth. Decline in income is intergenerational, with children whose parents divorce being likely to earn less as adults than children from intact families.⁸³

Crime and At-risk Youth

- Juvenile incarceration rates for children of divorced parents has been found to be 12x higher than for children in two-parent families.⁸⁴
- A U.S. longitudinal study which tracked over 6,400 boys over a period of 20 years found that children without biological fathers in the home are roughly 3x times more likely to commit a crime that leads to incarceration than are children of intact families.⁸⁵
- A child raised outside of an intact marriage is more likely to commit crimes as a teen and young adult. Boys reared in single-mother households and cohabitating households are approximately 2x more likely to commit a crime that leads to incarceration in comparison to children who grow up with both parents.⁸⁶
- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that even when controlling for maternal characteristics and background characteristics, adolescents aged 10-14 living with both biological parents who were continuously married exhibited lower levels of problem behavior than peers from any other family type.⁸⁷ Among adolescent girls, there is a strong correlation between family structure and delinquency,⁸⁸ hostile behavior,⁸⁹ drug use, larceny, skipping school,⁹⁰ and alcohol abuse.⁹¹

- Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (n = 10,286), researchers found that adolescents from homes with a recently divorced mother, a mother and stepfather, a single mother, or a single father reported more problem behaviors regardless of the community context.⁹²
- The proportion of adolescents born outside of marriage is linked to significant increases in homicide arrest rates for 15-19 year olds.⁹³
- Data from the National Longitudinal Adolescent Study of Adolescent Health (n = 13,231) showed that adolescents living with married, biological parents are less likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors such as deliberately damaging property, stealing, seriously injuring another individual, selling drugs, etc., than youths living with their mothers only, those living with their mothers and married stepfathers, or those living with their mothers and mothers' cohabiting partners.⁹⁴
- Divorce is correlated with more truancy, decreased ability to form successful social relationships and solve conflicts, and more frequent involvement in crime and drug abuse. This constellation of factors increases a child's likelihood of being at-risk for gang influence and involvement.⁹⁵
- High rates of family disruption and low rates of marriage were associated with high rates of murder and robbery among both African American and white adults and juveniles. "Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States."⁹⁶



Marriage Education and Relationship Skills Courses are proactive, preventative methods of addressing these key social concerns.

Links between Marriage Education and Marital Outcomes

- A meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—“to reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.” Researchers conclude that “...Marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”⁹⁷
- A meta-analysis of 20 different Marriage Education programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples found an average positive effect size of 0.44, indicating that the average couple participating in any one of the Marriage Education programs studied improved their behavior and quality of relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any Marriage Education program.⁹⁸





- A meta-analysis of 16 studies observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple after taking the Marriage Education training was able to out-perform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.⁹⁹
- A longitudinal study on a well-known Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.¹⁰⁰
- In a meta-analytic study on 117 studies...Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) was found to produce “significant, moderate effect sizes on two different outcomes that were commonly examined...For relationship quality, those effects range from .24 to .36. For communication skills, the effects were somewhat larger, ranging from .36 to .54. Moreover, when follow-up assessments were employed and evaluated, there was not much evidence of diminishing effects...Thus, it seems reasonable that federal and state policy makers are interested in exploring whether greater availability of MRE services can help more couples form and sustain healthy marriages.”¹⁰¹



¹ Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences. Institute for American Values (2005), pp. 31.

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