

Healthy Marriage: What is it and why does it matter?

Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D.
February 12, 2009



A time of change.....



A time of challenges.....

State Budgets

Federal Deficit

The economy

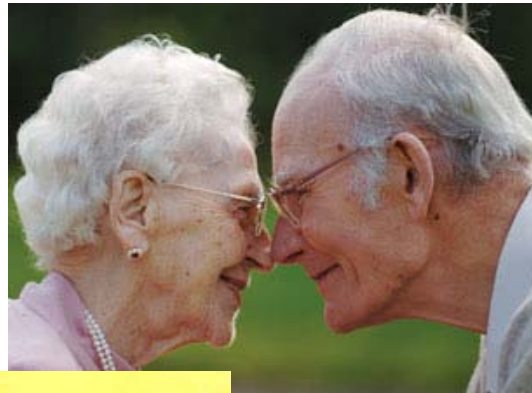
The Middle East

Afghanistan

Global Warming

Iraq

Healthy Marriage?





- Thesis: Family structure and marriage, especially healthy marriage, matter for children (and adults). Family structure and healthy marriage are strongly linked with fertility. They need to remain on the research agenda, and, cautiously, on the program and policy agenda.

3 broad questions:

- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- What is meant by “healthy marriage”?
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?

First, a brief overview of Child Trends

Child Trends' Mission

To improve outcomes for children.

We do this by providing research and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children:

- Policy makers
- Programs that serve children and families
- Foundations and philanthropists
- The media

Research Areas

- Indicators
- Education
- Early Childhood Development
- Fatherhood and Parenting
- Marriage and Family
- Child Welfare and Foster Care
- Health
- Poverty and Welfare
- Teen Sex and Pregnancy
- Positive Youth Development

What we do

- Track trends and identify emerging issues
- Provide data-driven, evidence-based guidance on policy and practice
- Help set the nation's research agenda for children
- Evaluate important programs and policies

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CrossCurrents Data Briefs

Welcome to *CrossCurrents*, a new series of data briefs from the Child Trends DataBank. These briefs draw from multiple indicators to examine broad topics and special populations of greatest concern to policy makers, service providers, the media, and the general public.

New Data Brief:

[Pre-Kindergarten to Third Grade \(PK-3\) School-Based Resources and Third Grade Outcomes](#)

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- [Are Teens Driving Safer?](#)
- [Indicators of Early School Success and Child Well-Being](#)
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LINKS SYNTHESIS

Listed below are fact sheets that synthesize the lessons learned from experimentally evaluated programs in the LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database.



 **What Works for Adolescent Reproductive Health: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions**

Victoria Ball; Kristin A. Moore
May 2008

What Works Programs Table for Adolescent Reproductive Health

 **What Works for Preventing and Stopping Substance Use in Adolescents: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions**

Tawana Bandy; Kristin A. Moore
May 2008

 **What Works for Civic Engagement: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions**

Andrew Rivers; Kristin A. Moore
May 2008

What Works Programs Table for Civic Engagement

 **What Works for Education: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Social Interventions to Enhance Educational Outcomes**

Thomson Ling; Kristin A. Moore
May 2008

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief
Research-to-Results
Child TRENDS
...information for out-of-school program practitioners in rural areas...
May 2008

Publication # 2008-18

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES
Ashleigh Collins, M.A., Jacinta Brons-Tinkew, Ph.D., and Cassandra Logan, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND
Young people who live in rural areas are less likely to finish high school¹ and to complete college² than their urban and suburban peers. These adolescents are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol.³ In fact, rural adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have the highest levels of drug use in this age group.⁴ Out-of-school time programs in rural areas can provide healthy and constructive activities that offer productive ways for children and youth to spend their time, build positive relationships, and receive academic support.^{5,6,7} This brief highlights the challenges faced by rural out-of-school programs and suggests several strategies that can strengthen these programs.

WHAT ARE RURAL COMMUNITIES?
Rural communities are areas located outside of urbanized or metropolitan areas, with populations of 10,000 or larger.⁸ Rural communities also include non-metropolitan towns⁹ of fewer than 2,500 residents.¹⁰ These towns are often located in open areas outside of suburban communities¹¹ and are sparsely populated.¹² The United States has approximately 2,000 rural counties, which cover 75 percent of U.S. land.¹³ Nearly one-fifth of all Americans live in rural areas.¹⁴

WHAT SPECIAL CHALLENGES DO RURAL OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS FACE?
Out-of-school programs in rural areas share many of the same challenges that programs in other areas face, such as coping with limited funding and addressing staff recruitment and retention issues. But studies have also identified unique challenges that can hinder the success of rural out-of-school programs:

- Rural programs serve at-risk populations. Although many rural areas are not impoverished,¹⁵ communities farther away from urban areas have higher poverty rates than those adjacent to urban areas.¹⁶ Nearly one in five rural children lives in poverty, compared with 15 percent of children in urban areas.¹⁷ Socio-economic disadvantages and limited health services put some rural youth at risk of academic failure or participation in "risky behaviors," such as substance abuse or criminal activity.¹⁸ One in five rural children is food insecure (that is, he or she has limited, uncertain, or no access to nutritious or safe foods¹⁹). Geographic isolation can also limit access to health care and other social services. Correspondingly, limited preventive services can contribute to an increased risk of poorer mental health.²⁰ Living in a rural area is also associated with higher teen suicide risk.²¹ Research links geographic isolation and a heightened risk of suicide among the male teen population.²² Suicide rates in some rural communities are among the highest in the nation.²³
- Geographic isolation can contribute to poor access to transportation. Rural communities are often spread over large geographic areas, resulting in long travel distances between children's homes and program sites.²⁴ Children in impoverished rural households are three times more likely to be without transportation than are children from non-rural households.²⁵ Rural areas often lack public transportation systems, and travel by car or van is adversely affected by rising gas prices.²⁶ As a result,

Fact Sheet
Research-to-Results
Child TRENDS
...information for program providers, funders, and policy makers seeking to reach at-risk children.
February 2008

Publication #2008-06

FAMILY AND NEIGHBORHOOD RISKS: HOW THEY RELATE TO INVOLVEMENT IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME ACTIVITIES
Kerina A. Moore, Ph.D. and Jordan Kahn, B.A.

BACKGROUND
Many studies find that children in high-risk neighborhoods¹ are less likely to participate in out-of-school time programs and are more likely to have poor outcomes than are their peers from more advantaged neighborhoods.² These poorer outcomes may result from the lower levels of resources, social cohesion, and trust present in high-risk neighborhoods.^{3,4} Similarly, children from high-risk families⁵ are less likely to participate in out-of-school time programs and are more likely to have poor outcomes than are their peers from more advantaged families.^{6,7} This reflects the multiple disadvantages experienced by children in high-risk families.⁸ An increasing number of studies have found that participation in an out-of-school time program is related to better outcomes for children,⁹ however, most of this research examines family risks and neighborhood risks separately. This fact sheet looks at both types of risk by analyzing data for children aged 6 to 17 from the National Survey of Children's Health.¹⁰

DO NEIGHBORHOOD RISKS RELATED TO PARTICIPATION IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?
How are family and neighborhood risks together related to involvement in out-of-school time activities? Do both matter? A high-risk neighborhood refers here to a neighborhood about which the child's parent believes that neighbors do not do as well as each other, do not watch out for each other's children, are not able to be counted on, have a bad influence on their children, and are not able to be trusted to help their children when they are hurt or scared. A high-risk family refers here to a family with a combination of at least four of the following factors: being in poverty, being a single-parent household having a low level of parental education, being a large family, and not owning a home.¹¹ In each graph below, the bar on the left shows involvement in activities for children in low-risk neighborhoods, the middle bar refers to children in medium-risk neighborhoods, and the bar on the right refers to children in high-risk neighborhoods.

CHILDREN IN LOW-RISK FAMILIES

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of all children are in low-risk families.¹²
- The vast majority of children in low-risk families are involved in at least one activity, and many are involved in two or more activities. For example, only 9% of children in low-risk neighborhoods are not involved, compared with 10% in medium-risk neighborhoods, and 15% in high-risk neighborhoods.
- Among children in low-risk families:
 - Children in high-risk neighborhoods are less likely to participate in out-of-school time activities.
 - However, only 18% are not involved in any kind of activity.

Children in Low-Risk Families by Level of Neighborhood Risk

Neighborhood Risk Level	Two or More Activities (%)	One Activity (%)	No Activities (%)
Low-risk Neighborhood	48	15	37
Medium-risk Neighborhood	44	15	41
High-risk Neighborhood	32	18	50

Practitioner Insights
Research-to-Results
Child TRENDS
...information for program providers seeking to involve their communities in out-of-school time programs.
March 2008

Publication #2008-13

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: TIPS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS
Mary Burkhauser, M.A., Jacinta Brons-Tinkew, Ph.D., and Elana Kennedy, B.A.

BACKGROUND
Increasing community involvement in out-of-school time programs can yield significant benefits to programs and the students that they serve.¹ Community partnerships have the potential to meet a wide variety of needs, from improving participant recruitment and attendance to contributing volunteers or other resources to programs.² This research brief discusses ways in which community involvement can be important for out-of-school time programs and describes how programs can begin to identify valuable community resources and develop strategies for leveraging community support.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?
A community is a group of people and/or organizations that are connected to each other through common interests, such as providing neighborhood services, or common characteristics, such as geographical location.³

Community involvement in an out-of-school time program refers to the participation of community members in any aspect of an effort that is designed to serve young people "before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer and other school breaks," as described by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.⁴ Community members may include individuals, families, schools, businesses, religious organizations, museums, libraries, and colleges and universities, among others, and they may demonstrate their involvement in various ways. For example, they may contribute physical resources, such as rent-free space or supplies, social resources, such as forming relationships with high-risk teens, individual resources, such as grant-writing expertise or mentoring experience, and financial resources, such as donations or other funding opportunities.⁵

WHAT BENEFITS CAN PROGRAMS DERIVE FROM COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?
Community involvement in out-of-school time programs is associated with many positive outcomes and with higher-quality programming overall.⁶ Research has shown that community involvement can:

- Improve program recruitment and attendance. Many out-of-school time programs are underutilized, especially by the high-risk, older youth most in need of them.⁷ Programs can improve recruitment and attendance by asking community members such as teachers, guidance counselors, parole officers, and other youth service providers to refer youth and encourage them to attend.^{8,9} Programs that are held at participants' schools can improve attendance by cutting out the need for travel.¹⁰ Programs that partner with participants' families enjoy higher attendance, as well as improved activities and increased participant and family satisfaction.¹¹

Our lens is that of the child



Three broad questions:

- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- What is meant by “healthy marriage”?
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?

Functions of Research

- Monitor Trends
- Evaluate policies and programs
- Rule out problems
- Identify problems
- Identify antecedents and mediators

Research on the implications of family structure for:

- Families
- Adults (especially men)
- Children

Family Economic Well-Being

- Single-parent and cohabiting families have substantially lower incomes and are much more likely to be poor
 - Because of:
 - ✓ Selection
 - ✓ Single parent families lose economies of scale when they maintain two households
- Income/poverty is both cause and effect

Having two (potential earners) protects if:

- ✓ Unemployed
- ✓ Benefits are cut back
- ✓ Health problems
- ✓ Retirement

Adults

- Marriage provides fathers with more sure, sustained, and frequent interaction with their children
- Marriage increases the likelihood of support and interaction from both sets of grandparents/kin

Adult Health

- Better health is both cause and effect
- Being engaged and getting married are related to declines in drinking and marijuana use
- Divorce is related to increases in drinking, smoking, and to losses of private health insurance
- Marriage is associated with decreased depression
- Divorce is related to more depression, a loss of economies of scale, and lower incomes

But, marriage is related to modest weight gain and to less exercise among men.

Child well-being

- ✓ Children develop best in two biological or adoptive parent families
 - Effects are “modest”, but.....
 - Broad
 - Academic
 - Behavior
 - Psychological well-being

Child well-being effects:

- For both boys and girls
- Across race/ethnicity groups (but most consistent for whites)
- Most kids are ok, but risks are much higher

- ✓ Prof. Paul Amato, University of Pennsylvania, notes that the effects are modest but the numbers are large
- ✓ If 1980 proportion of children living with biological parents prevailed today:
 - 300,000 fewer children 12-18 would repeat a grade;
 - 485,000 fewer would be suspended from school;
 - 250,000 fewer would need psychotherapy;
 - 210,000 fewer would be involved in violence; and
 - 30,000 fewer would attempt suicide annually.

- Multiple Pathways for negative effects:
 - Selection
 - Experience of marital conflict
 - Money
 - Loss adequate supervision, parenting
 - Turbulence
- Effects for child are modest but broad, and also varied:
 - Ending a violent, abusive marriage vs.
 - Ending a “good enough” marriage

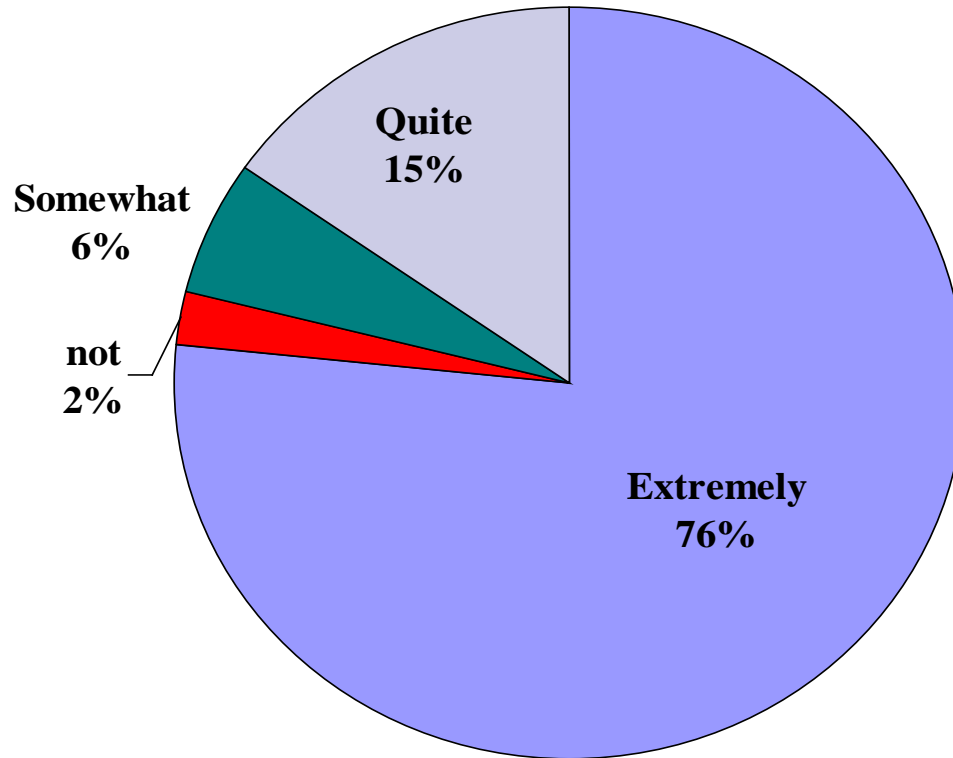
Most youth value marriage and plan to marry.

Considerable acceptance of:

- ✓ Cohabitation 64%
- ✓ Unmarried women having children 60%
- ✓ Divorce, if couple can't work out problems 48%

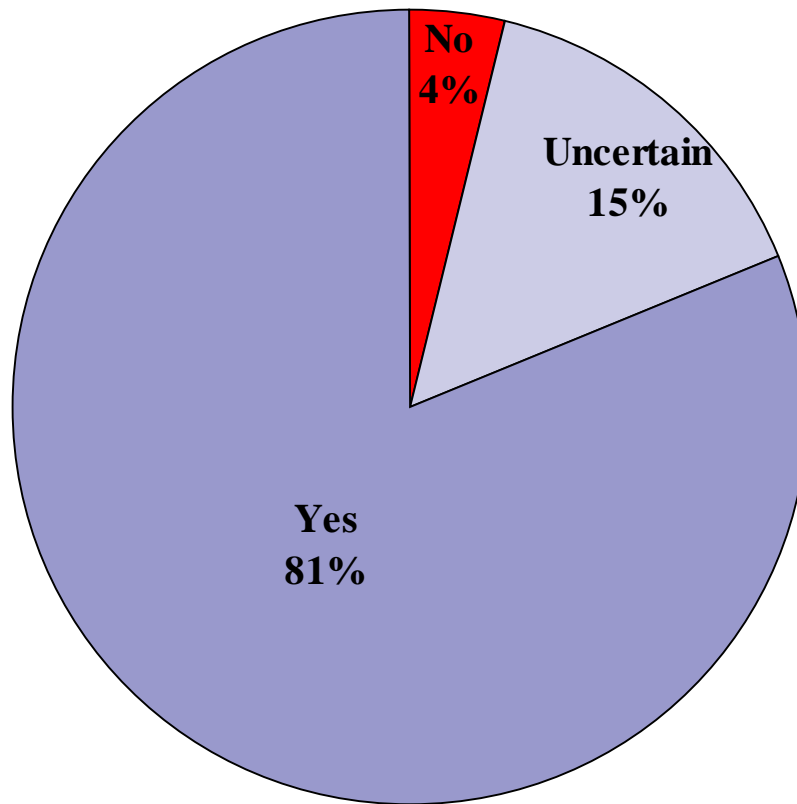
Source: NSFG

How important is a good marriage and a family life?

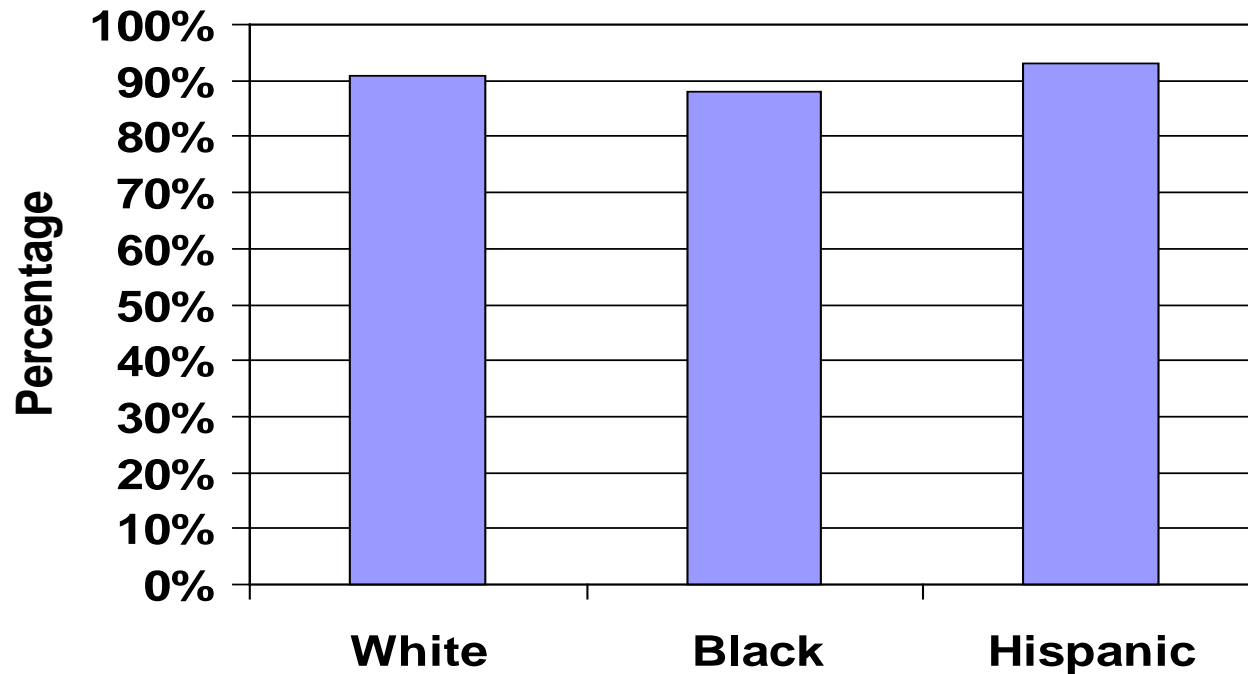


Source: MTF Seniors

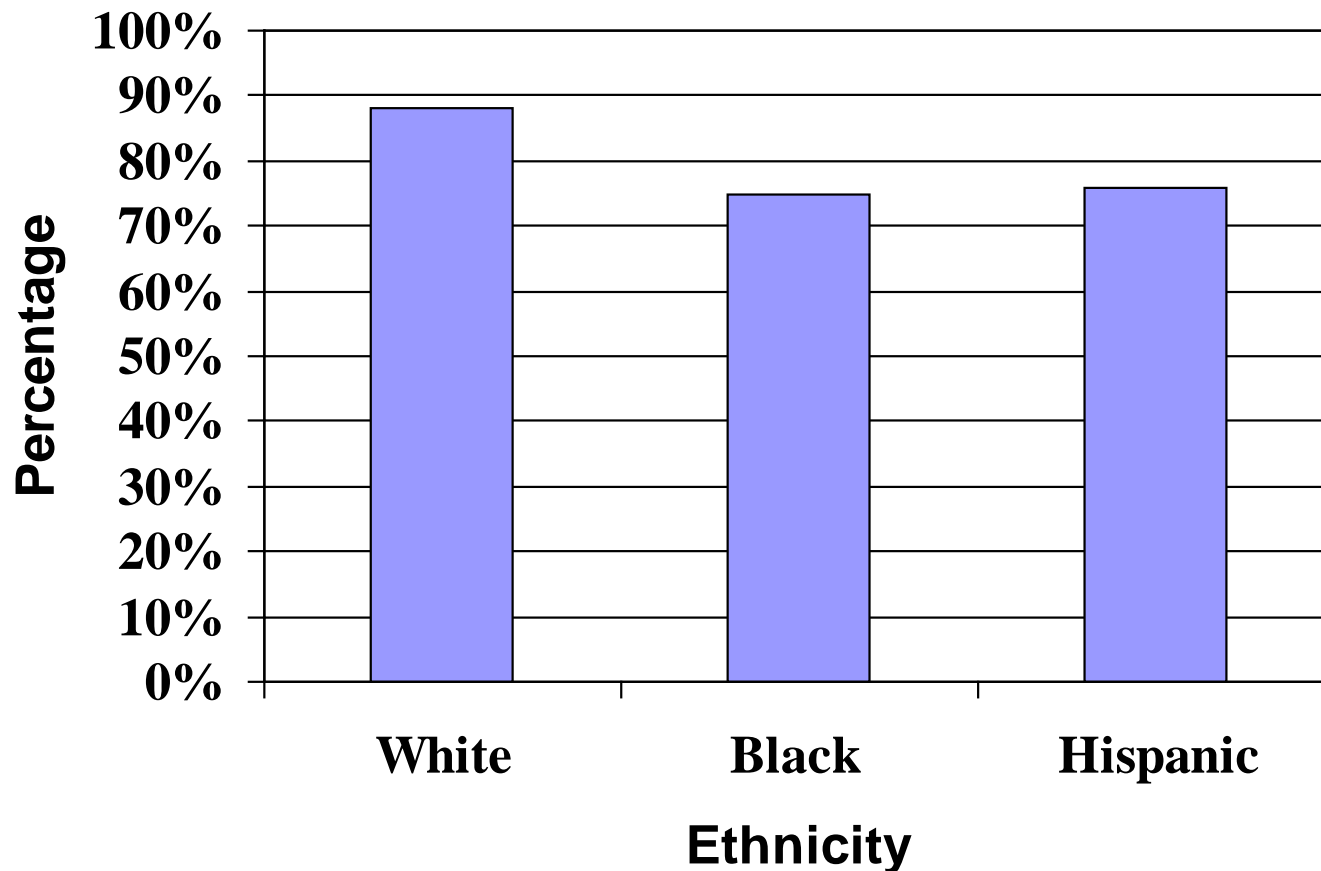
Do you expect to get married?



Most high school seniors see marriage as “extremely” or “quite” important



Most high school seniors expect to get married



Overall, on average:

- The case for marriage seems pretty solid, both in terms of children's well-being and the well-being of adults and families
- But, it is the experience of healthy marriage that is critical to the association with well-being.
 - ✓ Being legally married is not sufficient

Three broad questions:

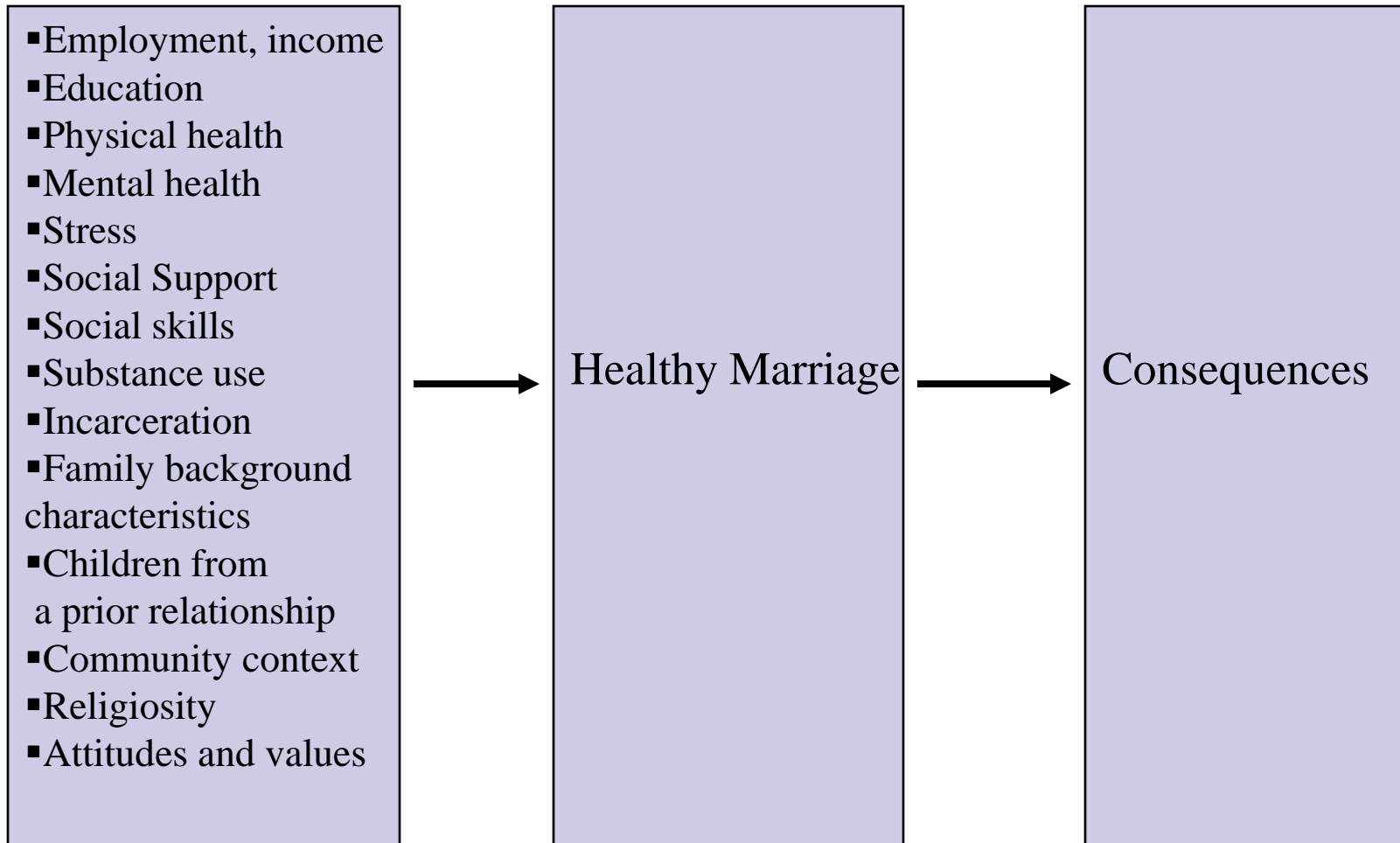
- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- **What is meant by “healthy marriage”?**
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?

Conceptualizing “Healthy Marriage” project:

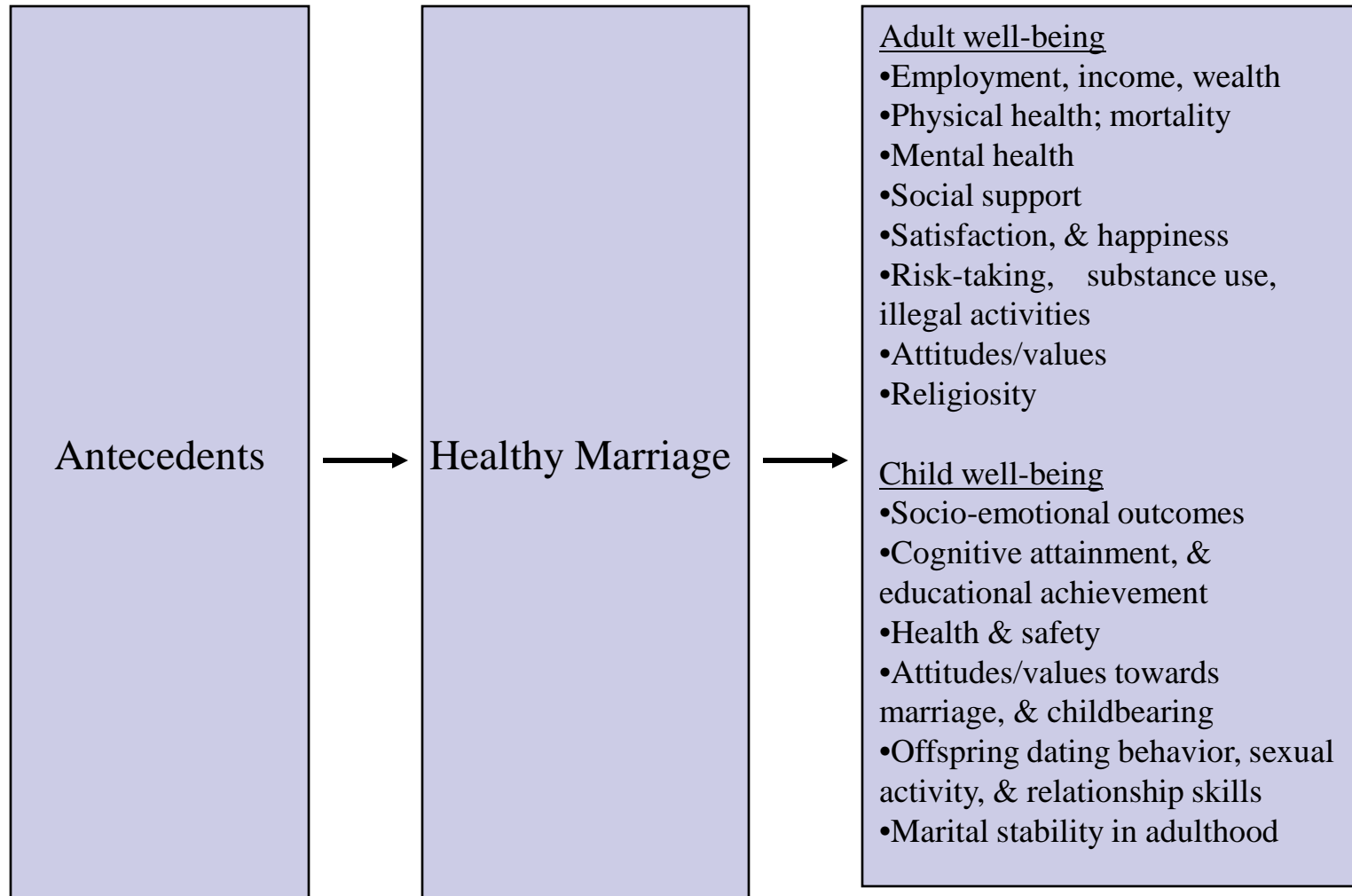
- Guiding framework
- Review of research
- Review of measures
- Cognitive interviews




Antecedents



Consequences





What are the elements of a “healthy marriage”?

- Satisfaction
- Communication
- Interaction
- Commitment
- Emotional Intimacy
- Conflict Resolution
- Lack of Violence
- Fidelity
- Duration
- Status

Satisfaction

- Global satisfaction
- Standard of living, time together

I think of all the good things in our marriage, especially now that we're parents – we're both very dedicated.

We don't have a lot of time [to spend together as a couple], so we have to make the most of what it is. It's important to look at what time we do get, and not focus so much on how much we get.

I think our marriage is great; we have a lot of good times together.

Communication

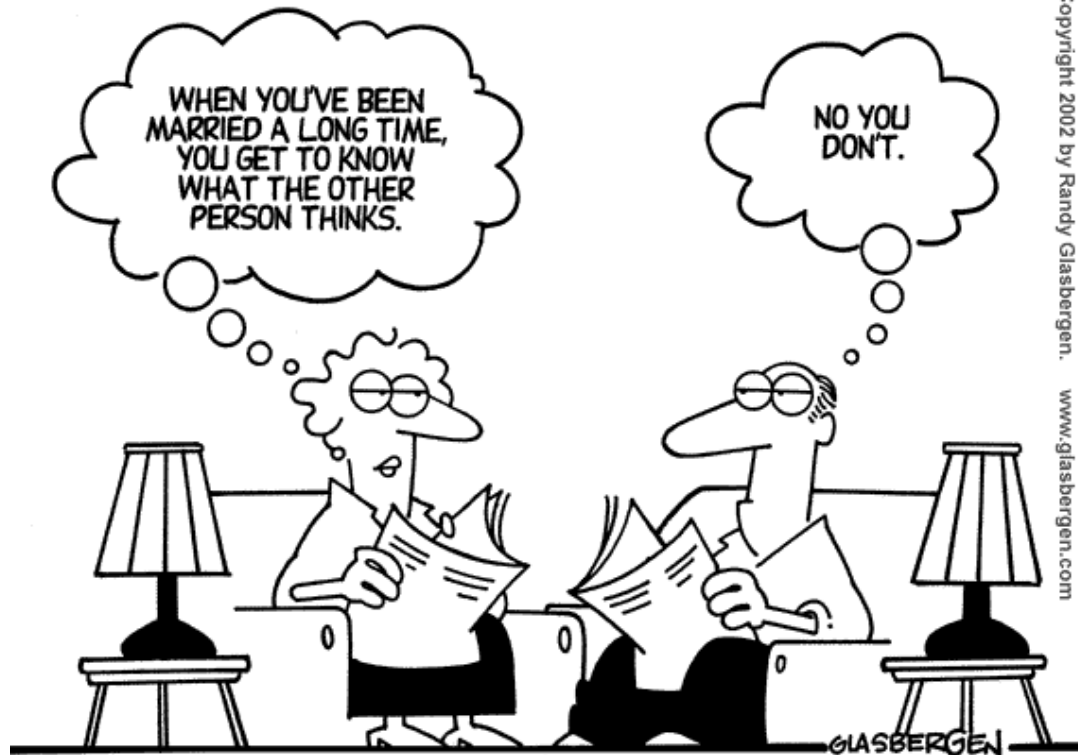
- Quality and Style:
 - Honesty, openness, respectful tone
- Type and content:
 - Talking about each other's days
 - Laughing together
 - Talking about the things that matter

It means saying whatever you feel or think without being scared of what he might say. And it's important to always tell the truth, no matter how big the issue is.

We ask, "How was your day at work?" We can relieve whoever had a rough day by letting them talk about it.

I'm not a mind reader, and neither is she.

Communication



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Interaction/Time together

- Day to day activities
- Social activities

It made me think of sharing daily things around the house like cooking and cleaning as partners.

Sometimes, it's good to be alone and not go out with the kids.

We rent movies, go to the park or for a drive. Sunday is our day to get lost, just us.

Commitment to the couple

- A sense of “we-ness”
- Obligation
- Willingness to sacrifice for the other person
- Expectations that relationship is long term

Being there spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and financially, no matter what.

Staying together. Being truthful. We should be ready to make it work no matter what happens.

Respecting each other at all times. Putting the other's feelings before your own. Wanting the other to be happy and trying to keep them happy. Not giving up even if things get bumpy.

Emotional Intimacy

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"She wants me to talk about my feelings, but every time I get close I get emotion sickness."

Emotional Intimacy

- Feeling “known”
- Closeness
- Trust, counting on each other
- Not feeling loneliness

If I'm sick and need [to be] nursed, in a financial bind, or if I need to be more responsible, she gives me support to do that.

We can express what we are feeling or thinking without fearing that we'll be criticized or laughed at.

We share the same views on what we expect later on in life; we have the same goals.

We're there for each other. She can see when I just need a hug, I don't even have to say a word.

Sex.

Conflict/Conflict Resolution



Conflict/Conflict Resolution

- Sources of disagreements, such as chores, sex, time, money, family planning, drinking or drugs, friends, family or other women and men
- Conflict resolution styles, such as keeping opinions to yourself, calm discussions, heated arguments, compromise, etc.

Every marriage has its conflicts.

We know how to disagree without being disagreeable.

“Some couples deal by yelling and screaming, but it’s wonderful when they find that they don’t have to. We used to write our feelings down and leave them out for the other person to read and come back to. We’d have the day to think about it after reading, and then we would talk about it without having to yell.”

Violence

- Physical and mental or psychological violence
- Includes physical assaults, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect

That would be if she's keeping tabs on me, knowing where I am at all times.

“Sometimes you really feel like hitting – this is when you should walk away.”

“Respect is very important. Hitting and pushing is not right.”

Fidelity

- Infidelity is a “dealbreaker”
- Respondents rate likelihood that partner is cheating
- Ex-partners, especially those with children, are a difficult test for couples

She knows how to conduct herself when she's not around me.

“Infidelity is the one issue that can be a cause for divorce.”

‘It can be one time or 20 times (sleeping with someone else), it doesn't matter – if you did it, it's cheating.’

Commitment to Children



"There must be something wrong with my parents. They've only been married ONCE!"

Commitment to the children

- Good co-parenting is tied to healthy relationships
- Children from previous relationships affect couples

[My spouse] went out to get a new job so that I could stay at home with the kids. He quit the job he had because it didn't offer good benefits, even though he LOVED the job.

We might need new clothes or shoes but if the kids need them, we'll get what they need first.

Duration and Status

- Legal status of relationship
- Duration of legal marriage
- Duration of relationship before marriage

We don't bring up the 'D' word – that's what we've learned.

Our measurement goal: a flexible set of measures

1. **A scale of 100**
2. **Ten separate & distinct, stand-alone subscales**
3. **Some composites & some stand-alone subscales**
4. **Marital satisfaction alone**
5. **An index (x out of ten elements)**
6. **A measure of “good enough” marriages, that distinguishes the unhealthy marriages**
7. **A discrepancy score, that compares the perspectives of the husband with the perspective of the wife**

We have also identified a number of observational measures

- Child Trends' review of the literature revealed many observational studies dating back to the 1980s
- Particularly useful in measuring communication and interaction
- Conflict, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy also commonly measured
- Not as useful for commitment, violence, fidelity, and marital status and duration

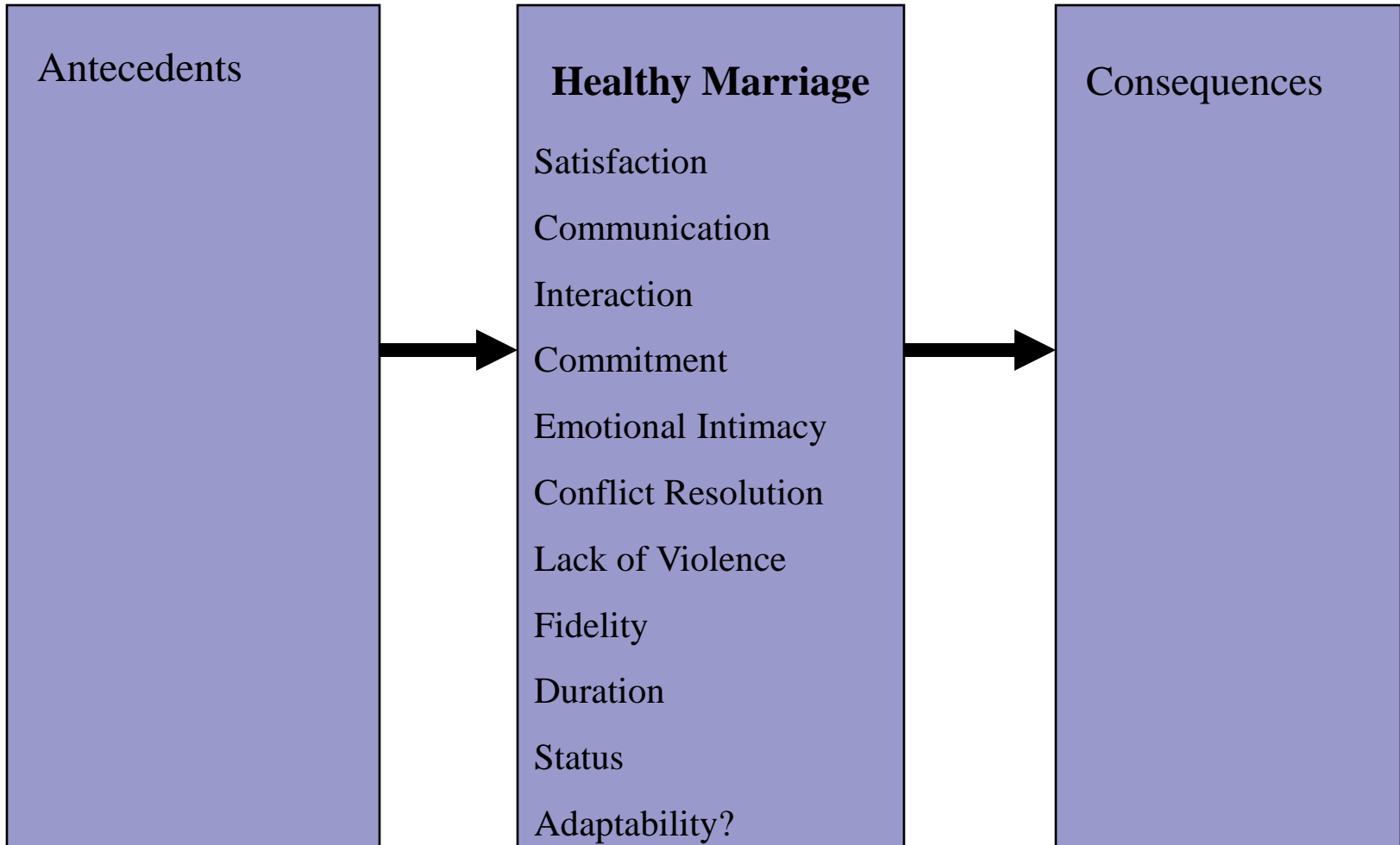
■ Definition of Healthy Marriage:

- So far, respondents' own definitions closely match our constructs
- Several respondents added shared spirituality and extended family involvement as part of the definition



Adaptability – an 11th element?

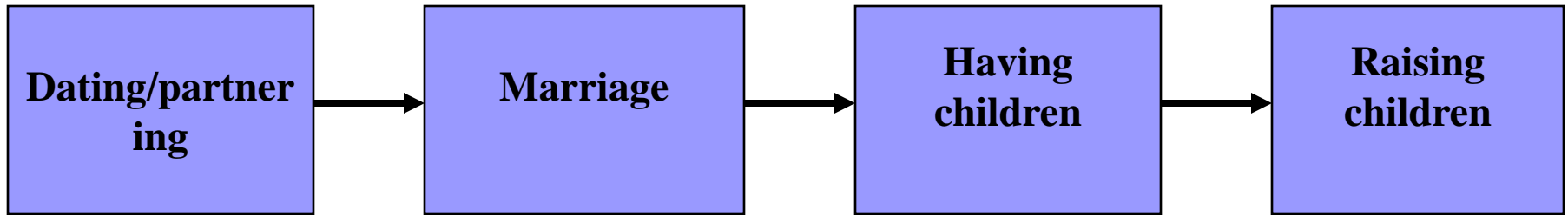
Adaptability: the ability to grow, change, and develop as individuals and as a couple over time




Three broad questions:


- Why should researchers and policy makers care about marriage or healthy marriage?
- What is meant by “healthy marriage”?
- What are some issues on which further research is needed?

■ The traditional pattern:





What permutations matter for the well-being of families, children and adults?



→ More research is needed, both quantitative and qualitative, micro and macro, on:

- ✓ **Cohabitation**
- ✓ **Causes and prevention of domestic violence**
- ✓ **Gay couples**
- ✓ **Contraception**
- ✓ **Unintended pregnancy**
- ✓ **Teen childbearing and Non-marital childbearing**
- ✓ **Conflict resolution strategies**
- ✓ **Studies of Couples**
- ✓ **Comparisons with other countries**
- ✓ **Implications of family structure & marriage for communities**

✓ Evaluation Studies

- **Random assignment experimental studies of approaches**
 - ✓ **Building Strong Families**
 - ✓ **Supporting Healthy Marriage**
- **Studies that combine job/income assistance with marriage education**
- **Marriage/relationship education for youth**
- **Premarital education**
- **Fatherhood programs**

Implications for public policy?

- **Remove marriage penalties**
- **The prevention of unplanned pregnancies**
- **Medicaid coverage of marriage counseling**

Antecedents

- Employment, income
- Education
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Stress
- Social support
- Social skills
- Substance use
- Incarceration
- Family background characteristics
- Children from a prior relationship
- Community context
- Religiosity
- Attitudes and values

Healthy Marriage

- Satisfaction
- Communication
- Interaction
- Commitment
- Emotional Intimacy
- Conflict Resolution
- Violence
- Fidelity
- Duration
- Status
- Adaptability

Consequences

- Adult well-being
 - Employment, income, wealth
 - Physical health; mortality
 - Mental health
 - Social support
 - Satisfaction, & happiness
 - Risk-taking, substance use, illegal activities
 - Attitudes/values
 - Religiosity
- Child well-being
 - Socio-emotional outcomes
 - Cognitive attainment, & educational achievement
 - Health & safety
 - Attitudes/values towards marriage, & childbearing
 - Offspring dating behavior, sexual activity, & relationship skills
 - Marital stability in adulthood



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