

# Live- n relationships essay



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INTRODUCTION. Marriage is falling out of fashion. Once the most popular living arrangement for couples, marriage is being overlooked by a growing number attracted to cohabitation. Many couples are opting for a replacement or “trial alternative” to marriage. As a result, marriage is becoming more like buying a car—people want a “test drive” before they sign the dotted line. The reasons are varied. Some feel it’s not the right time for marriage while others think living together is the best insurance against divorce.

Once rare, cohabiting is becoming the norm. The number of marriages preceded by cohabitation rose from about 10 percent in 1965 to over 50 percent by 1994. And the percentage of women in their late 30s who said that they had cohabited at least once reached 48 percent in 1995. Is this the best type of living arrangement? Contrary to the popular image, living together does less to mature young relationships and more to harm them.

A study on premarital cohabitation conducted by researchers from Yale University, Columbia University, and the Institute for Resource Development at Westinghouse revealed that “the divorce rates of women who cohabit are nearly 80 percent higher than the rates of those who do not.” In a study released this month from the University of Michigan, researcher Pamela Smock discovered that 55 percent of cohabiting couples marry and 40 percent end the relationship within five years. She also found that “premarital cohabitation tends to be associated with lower marital quality and increased risk of divorce. She’s right. So why does cohabitation destroy so many relationships? Couples who live together are often less committed to the relationship over the long-term. And since marriage is the ultimate manifestation of commitment, married couples are more often willing to

work out their differences before walking out of the relationship. Across the spectrum, marriage has enormous value. Based on Family First's newly released report, *Marriage Matters: A Social Analysis of the State of the Union*, we found that marriage significantly increases the overall quality of life.

The tangible benefits of marriage extend from general feelings of happiness to markedly better states of health. Married people enjoy a longer, healthier life than those who are not married. Children from married homes are less likely to engage in early, premarital sex and have less discipline problems. Marriage has always been the overwhelming norm for domestic relationships throughout the history of humankind. Marriage is to human culture what the atom is to the physical world. It is the one irreducible building block essential for a healthy and productive society.

Any attempt to replace it will fracture and hinder a couple's hope for a long and healthy marriage. Is living together a trend, a tradition or a trial period? There is no formula for human relationships. One man's poison is another man's meat, one girl's trash is another's treasure and one man's one night stand is another man's lifelong love! Apart from celebrity wedding crashes, commodification of love and marriage and falling out of the traditional "till death do us apart" concept, another social phenomenon that contributes to number of marriages falling like a pack of cards today is cohabitation.

The acceptance of couples living together out of wedlocks today has contributed to the decline in society's general faith in the institution of matrimony. The longevity of marriage and statistical crescendos of divorce rates make us wonder whether man is moving back to being a polygamous

animal or is it just the way human spirit is supposed to evolve? Marriage is a socially constructed phenomenon and man is a socially abiding animal; exceptions only prove the rule!

The falling out rates of marriages could probably be an indicator of the fact that as much as man needs love, commitment and stability in life, the need for freedom of thought, want and expression is ever-dominating.

Cohabitation gives people the best of both the worlds as one experiences togetherness without the fear of permanence. With life expectancy at an all-time high and change so usual that it's almost mundane, people need to feel that they are not in a rut, they always have an option to freedom, they can unburden the responsibility and radically change their lives without upsetting norms of the society.

Living in gives people a perceived control of a situation that often lacks in a marriage. A person taking a divorce becomes a stereotype, a kind of breed of people whom you should avoid falling in love with and who can be labeled troubled. The character of Ross in a popular television series, Friends, would be an apt example to show that a man avoids at every cost to divulge the fact that he has been divorced thrice by the time he is 30. It would have been just another good old, regular break up had he not married. How Cohabitation Differs from Marriage

The Facts Living together leads to living alone In the mid-1960s, only five per cent of single women lived with a man before getting married. By the 1990s, about 70 per cent did so. Some people think that living together will lead automatically to marriage, but that often is not the case. Many cohabitations

break up. For many other couples, cohabitation is viewed as an alternative to marriage rather than a preparation for it. However, this alternative is less likely than marriage to lead to a long-term stable commitment.

**Stability** Cohabiting relationships are fragile. They are always more likely to break up than marriages entered into at the same time, regardless of age or income. On average, cohabitations last less than two years before breaking up or converting to marriage. Less than four per cent of cohabitations last for ten years or more. **2 Cohabiting also influences later marriages.** The more often and the longer that men and women cohabit, the more likely they are to divorce later. **3 Cheating**

Both men and women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners than married people. **4 Economics** At all socio-economic levels, cohabiting couples accumulate less wealth than married couples. **5 Married men** earn 10 to 40 percent more than single or cohabiting men, and they are more successful in their careers, particularly when they become fathers. **6 Married women without children** earn about the same as childless single or cohabiting women. All women who take time out of employment to have children lose some earning power-whether they are married or not. However, cohabiting and lone mothers often lack access to the father's income, making it more difficult to balance their caring responsibilities with their careers. **Health** Cohabitants have more health problems than married people, probably because cohabitants put up with behaviour in their partners which husbands and wives would discourage, particularly regarding smoking, alcohol and substance abuse. **8 Cohabitants** are also much more likely to suffer from depression than married people. **9**

Domestic violence Women in cohabiting relationships are more likely than wives to be abused.

In one study, marital status was the strongest predictor of abuse-ahead of race, age, education or housing conditions. We offer four principles that may help. These principles may not be the last words on the subject but they are consistent with the available evidence and seem most likely to help never-married young adults avoid painful losses in their love lives and achieve satisfying and long-lasting relationships and marriage. 1. Consider not living together at all before marriage. Cohabitation appears not to be helpful and may be harmful as a try-out for marriage.

There is no evidence that if you decide to cohabit before marriage you will have a stronger marriage than those who don't live together, and some evidence to suggest that if you live together before marriage, you are more likely to break up after marriage. Cohabitation is probably least harmful (though not necessarily helpful) when it is prenuptial – when both partners are definitely planning to marry, have formally announced their engagement and have picked a wedding date. 2. Do not make a habit of cohabiting.

Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences, both for your own sense of well-being and for your chances of establishing a strong lifelong partnership. Contrary to popular wisdom, you do not learn to have better relationships from multiple failed cohabiting relationships. In fact, multiple cohabiting is a strong predictor of the failure of future relationships. 3. Limit cohabitation to the shortest possible period of time. The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely it is that the low-commitment

ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what is required for a successful marriage. . Do not cohabit if children are involved. Children need and should have parents who are committed to staying together over the long term. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents and the effects of breakup can be devastating and often long lasting. Moreover, children living in cohabiting unions are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence, including lethal violence, than are children living with married parents. WHY COHABITATION IS HARMFUL FOR CHILDREN

Of all the types of cohabitation, that involving children is by far the most problematic. In 1997, 36% of all unmarried-couple households included a child under eighteen, up from only 21% in 1987. 22 For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households. 23 By one recent estimate nearly half of all children today will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16. 24 One of the greatest problems for children living with a cohabiting couple is the high risk that the couple will break up. 5 Fully three quarters of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents split up before they reach age sixteen, whereas only about a third of children born to married parents face a similar fate. One reason is that marriage rates for cohabiting couples have been plummeting. In the last decade, the proportion of cohabiting mothers who go on to eventually marry the child's father declined from 57% to 44%. 26 Parental break up, as is now widely known, almost always entails a myriad of personal and social difficulties for children, some of which can be long lasting.

For the children of a cohabiting couple these may come on top of a plethora of already existing problems. One study found that children currently living with a mother and her unmarried partner had significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children from intact families. 27 It is important to note that the great majority of children in unmarried-couple households were born not in the present union but in a previous union of one of the adult partners, usually the mother. 8 This means that they are living with an unmarried stepfather or mother's boyfriend, with whom the economic and social relationships are often tenuous. For example, these children have no claim to child support should the couple separate. Child abuse has become a major national problem and has increased dramatically in recent years, by more than 10% a year according to one estimate. 29 In the opinion of most researchers, this increase is related strongly to changing family forms.

Surprisingly, the available American data do not enable us to distinguish the abuse that takes place in married-couple households from that in cohabiting-couple households. We do have abuse-prevalence studies that look at stepparent families (both married and unmarried) and mother's boyfriends (both cohabiting and dating). Both show far higher levels of child abuse than is found in intact families. 30 One study in Great Britain did look at the relationship between child abuse and the family structure and marital background of parents, and the results are disturbing.

It was found that, compared to children living with married biological parents, children living with cohabiting but unmarried biological parents are 20 times more likely to be subject to child abuse, and those living with a



mother and a cohabiting boyfriend who is not the father face an increased risk of 33 times. In contrast, the rate of abuse is 14 times higher if the child lives with a biological mother who lives alone. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the most unsafe of all family environments for children is that in which the mother is living with someone other than the child's biological father. <sup>1</sup> This is the environment for the majority of children in cohabiting couple households. Part of the enormous differences indicated above are probably due to differing income levels of the families involved. But this points up one of the other problems of cohabiting couples-their lower incomes. It is well known that children of single parents fare poorly economically when compared to the children of married parents. Not so well known is that cohabiting couples are economically more like single parents than like married couples.

While the 1996 poverty rate for children living in married couple households was about 6%, it was 31% for children living in cohabiting households, much closer to the rate of 45% for children living in families headed by single mothers. <sup>32</sup> One of the most important social science findings of recent years is that marriage is a wealth enhancing institution. According to one study, childrearing cohabiting couples have only about two-thirds of the income of married couples with children, mainly due to the fact that the average income of male cohabiting partners is only about half that of male married partners. <sup>3</sup> The selection effect is surely at work here, with less well-off men and their partners choosing cohabitation over marriage. But it also is the case that men when they marry, especially those who then go on to have children, tend to become more responsible and productive. <sup>34</sup> They

earn more than their unmarried counterparts. An additional factor not to be overlooked is the private transfer of wealth among extended family members, which is considerably lower for cohabiting couples than for married couples. 35 It is clear that family members are more willing to transfer wealth to “ in-laws” than to mere boyfriends or girlfriends.

Some people believe that if a cohabiting couple have children together, then they must be committed and stable. However, cohabitations with children are even more likely to break up than childless ones. 11 About 15 percent of one-parent families are created through the break-up of cohabiting unions. One study found that less than ten per cent of women who have their first child in a cohabiting relationship are still cohabiting ten years later. About 40 per cent will have married, but 50 percent will be lone unmarried mothers because their relationships have broken up. 2 Today, more than 20% of children are born to cohabiting couples. However, only about one third of those children will remain with both their parents throughout their childhood. That is partly because cohabiting couples who have children are even more likely to break up than childless couples, and partly because cohabiting couples who subsequently marry are more likely to divorce, and to divorce earlier. 13 All this means that children born to cohabiting parents are more likely to experience a series of disruptions in their family life, which can have negative consequences for their emotional and educational development.

Children living with cohabiting couples do less well at school and are more likely to suffer from emotional problems than children of married couples. 14 Financially, children of cohabitants are less well off than children whose parents are married. Married fathers are more likely than cohabiting fathers

to support their children. Even after the break-up of their parents' relationship, children of divorced parents are more likely than children of cohabiting couples who have split up to receive support from their fathers. 5 Unmarried fathers, even those cohabiting with their children's mother, do not automatically have the same parental rights as married or divorced fathers. If their parents break up, children born to cohabiting couples are less likely than children of divorced parents to maintain contact with their fathers. 16 Source: Berthoud, R. and Gershuny, J. , editors, *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families*, London: The Policy Press, 2000, p. 40.

Cohabitants as ' step-parents' When married or cohabiting couples with children divorce, or break up, one parent sometimes remarries or moves in with a new person.

One scholar estimated that, before their seventeenth birthday, more than one in twenty children would live in a formalized step-family where one parent (usually their mother) has remarried, and over one in fourteen children would live in an informal ' step-family' where their mother is living with someone who has neither a biological nor a legal tie to her child. 17 Statistically speaking, these informal cohabiting step-families are the most unsafe environments for children. Children living in cohabiting step-families are at significantly higher risk of child abuse.

Live-in and visiting boyfriends are much more likely than biological fathers or married step-fathers to inflict severe physical abuse, sexual abuse and child killing. 18 Living in a step-family poses other risks to young people. In one study, young men living in step-families were 1. 4 times more likely to be serious or persistent offenders. 19 Young women in step-families were 2. 25

times as likely to be serious offenders. More than one in five young people living in step-families runs away from home. CONCLUSION

Despite its widespread acceptance by the young, the remarkable growth of unmarried cohabitation in recent years does not appear to be in children's or the society's best interest. The evidence suggests that it has weakened marriage and the intact, two-parent family and thereby damaged our social well-being, especially that of women and children. We can not go back in history, but it seems time to establish some guidelines for the practice of cohabitation and to seriously question the further institutionalization of this new family form.

In place of institutionalizing cohabitation, in our opinion, we should be trying to revitalize marriage-not along classic male-dominant lines but along modern egalitarian lines. Particularly helpful in this regard would be educating young people about marriage from the early school years onward, getting them to make the wisest choices in their lifetime mates, and stressing the importance of long-term commitment to marriages. Such an educational venture could build on the fact that a huge majority of our nation's young people still express the strong desire to be in a long-term monogamous marriage.

These ideas are offered to the American public and especially to society's leaders in the spirit of generating a discussion. Our conclusions are tentative, and certainly not the last word on the subject. There is an obvious need for more research on cohabitation, and the findings of new research, of course, could alter our thinking. What is most important now, in our view, is a

national debate on a topic that heretofore has been overlooked. Indeed, few issues seem more critical for the future of marriage and for generations to come.