

Waiting to wed: Young adults on sex and marriage

by [Mark Regnerus](#) and [Jeremy Uecker](#)

This article appears in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue.



© NEUSTOCK

Some outside observers look at the relationship scene among young adults and consider that it is entirely about short-term hookups and that the majority of emerging adults are avoiding lasting and meaningful intimate relationships in favor of random sex. While sexual norms have certainly changed, there's no evidence to suggest that emerging adults are uninterested in relationships that last, including marriage. In fact, they want to marry. Lots of studies show that nearly all young women and men say they would like to get married someday. We're not talking half or even 80 percent, but more like 93 to 96 percent. Most just don't want to marry now or anytime soon. They feel no rush.

The slow but steady increase in average age at first marriage—to its present-day 26 for women and 28 for men—suggests that the purpose of dating or romantic relationships is changing or has changed. Most sexual relationships among emerging adults neither begin with marital intentions nor end in marriage or even

cohabitation. They just begin and end.

Reasons for their termination are numerous, of course, but one overlooked possibility is that many of them don't know how to get or stay married to the kind of person they'd like to find. For not a few, their parents provided them with a glimpse into married life, and what they saw at the dinner table—if they dined with their parents much at all—didn't look very inviting. They hold the institution of marriage in high regard, and they put considerable pressure—probably too much—on what their own eventual marriage ought to look like. And yet it seems that there is little effort from any institutional source aimed at helping emerging adults consider how their present social, romantic and sexual experiences shape or war against their vision of marriage—or even how marriage might fit in with their other life goals.

In fact, talk of career goals seems increasingly divorced from the relational context in which many emerging adults may eventually find themselves. They speak of the MDs, JDs and PhDs they intend to acquire with far more confidence than they speak of committed relationships or marriage. The former seem attainable, the latter unclear or unreliable. To complicate matters, many educated emerging adults are concerned about possible relational constraints on their career goals.

Since emerging adults esteem the idea of marriage and yet set it apart as inappropriate for their age, waiting until marriage for a fulfilling sex life is considered not just quaint and outdated but quite possibly foolish. Sex outside relationships might still be disparaged by many, but not sex before marriage. And yet creating successful sexual relationships—ones that last a very long time or even into marriage—seems only a modest priority among many in this demographic group. Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist who focuses on emerging adulthood, notes the absence of relationship permanence as a value in the minds of emerging adults:

Finding a love partner in your teens and continuing in a relationship with that person through your early twenties, culminating in marriage, is now viewed as unhealthy, a mistake, a path likely to lead to disaster. Those who do not experiment with different partners are warned that they will eventually wonder what they are missing, to the detriment of their marriage.

Arnett's right. The majority of young adults in America not only think they should explore different relationships, they believe it may be foolish and wrong not to.

Instead, they place value upon flexibility, autonomy, change and the potential for upgrading. Allison, an 18-year-old from Illinois, characterizes this value when she describes switching from an older, long-term boyfriend (and sexual partner) to a younger one: "I really liked having a steady boyfriend for a long time, but then it just got to the point where it was like, 'OK, I need something different.' It wasn't that I liked him any less or loved or cared about him any less, I just needed a change." Many emerging adults—especially men—conduct their relationships with a nagging sense that there may still be someone better out there.

Despite the emphasis on flexibility and freedom, most emerging adults wish to fall in love, commit and marry someday. And some already have (more about them shortly). The vast majority of those who haven't married believe themselves to be too young to "settle down." They are definitely not in a hurry. In a recent nationwide survey of young men, 62 percent of unmarried 25- to 29-year-olds (and 51 percent of 30- to 34-year-olds) said they were "not interested in getting married any time soon."

While their reticence could be for good reasons, their widespread use of this phrase suggests a tacitly antagonistic perspective about marriage. "Settling down" is something people do when it's time to stop having fun and get serious—when it's time to get married and have children, two ideas that occur together in the emerging-adult mind. In the same national survey of men we just noted, 81 percent of unmarried men age 25 to 29 agreed that "at this stage in your life, you want to have fun and freedom." (Even 74 percent of single 30- to 34-year-olds agreed.) That figure would have been even higher had men in their early twenties been interviewed.

Trevor, a 19-year-old virgin from North Carolina, agrees wholeheartedly with this sentiment. He would like to marry someday. When asked if there were certain things that people should accomplish before they're ready to marry, he lists the standard economic criteria. But he also conveys a clear understanding that his best days would be behind him: "I'd say before you're married, make sure you have a place to live. Don't have a child before marriage. . . . Have a decent paying job because, I mean, it's only going to get worse."

A distinctive fissure exists in the minds of young Americans between the carefree single life and the married life of economic pressures and family responsibilities. The one is sexy, the other is sexless. In the minds of many, sex is for the young and

single, while marriage is for the old. Marriage is quaint, adorable.

Thus a key developmental task for Juan, a 19-year-old from Southern California, is to have his fill of sex before being content with a fixed diet. His advice would be to "get a lot of stuff out of your system, like messing around with girls and stuff, or partying."

Likewise, Megan, 22, from Texas, doesn't conceive of parenthood as a sexual life stage, the irony of it aside. She captures what very many young men and women believe to be a liability of marriage: the end of good sex. The last omnibus sex study of Americans—issued in 1994—disputes Megan's conclusion, but the power of surveys and statistics is nothing compared to the strength of a compelling story in the minds of many people.

We asked Megan whether married life would be less sexual than her single life:

Probably. [*Because?*] Just, as you age, your sex drive goes down. [OK.] I mean not because you want to be less sexual, that could be the case, but I won't know till I'm older. [*So some people say when you get married, you settle down, like it's literally a settling down. Do you look at marriage and married sex as being like, "That's off in the future; it might be a disappointment. Now I'm having a better time"?*] Yeah. [*Do you?*] Yes. [*Why?*] Why do I think it might be a disappointment? [*Sure.*] Um, just because of the horror stories of getting married. Nobody wants to have sex anymore. [*Where do you hear these stories?*] Movies, other people. . . . [*Like what? Can you think of one?*] Um, there's plenty. Like the movie that just came out—*License to Wed*—there's this one scene where the guy is sitting on top of a roof with his best friend talking about how his wife doesn't want to have sex anymore.

Although Megan enjoys sex for its own sake and predicts a declining sex life in her future marriage, it's not the presumed death of sex that frightens her about marriage: "It's living with a guy that freaks me out." Author Laura Sessions Stepp claims that today's young adults are so self-centered that they don't have time for "we," only for "me." They begrudge the energy that real relationships require. If that's true—and we suspect that's a journalistic overgeneralization—Megan should get together with Patrick. While so far he's slept with six women, Patrick informed us that he cannot imagine being married, and yet he too plans to do exactly that someday:

Well, I don't want to get married now. I guess, like, I do want to find a girl, but I just can't see myself being married. . . . [*And you can't see yourself getting married or being married because?*] I guess I just don't like the idea of being real tied down.

Patrick's current girlfriend is someone to hang out with, have sex with and generally enjoy the company of. Imagining more than that frightens him: "You sacrifice like so much stuff to be in a relationship that I guess I'm just not ready to make that huge sacrifice yet." Nor is 23-year-old Gabriela from Texas:

Once you get married, your responsibilities change. It's no longer, "Oh, I want to go to China next year. I have to save up money." No. Now you have to pay for the house—or you have a job and you can't just leave, because your husband can't get that day off. And things like that. It isn't just you, it becomes you and another person. [*So what do you think of that?*] I think that it's fine when I'm older. [*Which will be when?*] At least 30.

Devon, a 19-year-old from Washington, does most of his peers one better. Getting married—which he too eventually plans to do—is not just about "settling down" from the vibrant sex life of his late teen years. It signifies a death, albeit a scripted and necessary one. When asked what he wanted out of marriage, he said, "Just to have a good ending to my life, basically." Chen, a 20-year-old from Illinois, agrees: "I don't really plan on getting married for a while, or settling down for a while. I'd like to do all my living when I'm young. Like, save all the rest of life—falling in love and having a family—for later."

Such perspectives fly in the face of much empirical evidence about the satisfactions of marriage. That is, marriage tends to be good for emotional as well as sexual intimacy. Married people have access to more regular, long-term sex than do serially monogamous single adults. But that doesn't feel true to many emerging adults. Many perceive their parents as having modest or poor sex lives, and movie sex largely features singles.

Not every emerging adult pictures marriage as a necessary but noble death, of course. Elizabeth from New York likewise sees her twenties as about having fun. But her thirties (and marriage) would not be simply about settling down; they would be the time "when your life is really gonna kick into gear." We suspect that contemporary male and female perspectives on marriage, sexuality and fertility are

indeed different, on average—that many men anticipate the institution as necessary and good for them, but with less enthusiasm for it than women express. For emerging-adult men, the single life is great and married life could be good. For women, the single life is good but married life is potentially better.

Ironically, after years of marriage, men tend to express slightly higher marital satisfaction than women. Moreover, marriage seems to be particularly important in civilizing men, turning their attention away from dangerous, antisocial or self-centered activities and toward the needs of a family. Married men drink less, fight less and are less likely to engage in criminal activity than their single peers. Married husbands and fathers are significantly more involved and affectionate with their wives and children than are men in cohabiting relationships (with or without children). The norms, status rewards and social support offered to men by marriage all combine to help them walk down the path of adult responsibility.

No wonder the idea of marriage can feel like a death to them. It is indeed the demise of unchecked self-centeredness and risk taking. Many men elect to delay it as long as seems feasible, marrying on average around age 28. That's hardly an old age, of course, but remember that age 28 is their median (or statistical middle) age at first marriage—meaning that half of all men marry then or later. Their decision to delay makes sense from a sexual economics perspective: they can access sex relatively easily outside of marriage, they can obtain many of the perceived benefits of marriage by cohabiting rather than marrying, they encounter few social pressures from peers to marry, they don't wish to marry someone who already has a child, and they want to experience the joys and freedoms of singleness as long as they can.

A good deal more is known about why people are not marrying in early adulthood than why some still do. And yet a minority marry young—and even more wish they were married—despite the fact that cohabitation and premarital sex are increasingly normative and socially acceptable. While the majority of emerging adults have no wish to be married at present, more than we expected actually harbor this desire. Just under 20 percent of unmarried young men and just under 30 percent of such women said they would like to be married now. Religious emerging adults are more apt to want to be married. And those emerging adults who are in a romantic or sexual relationship are nearly twice as likely to want to be married now than those who aren't in a relationship. Cohabitors are more than four times as likely to want to be married as those who are single. In fact, just under half of cohabiting young women and 40 percent of cohabiting young men said they'd like to be married right

now.

Obviously, getting married introduces the risk of getting divorced. And that very specter remains a key mental barrier to relationship commitment among emerging adults. Six in ten unmarried men in their late twenties—who are already beginning to lag behind the median age at marriage—report that one of their biggest concerns about marriage is that it will end in divorce. Thus getting married young is increasingly frowned upon not just as unwise but as a moral mistake in which the odds of failure are perceived as too high to justify the risk.

This conventional wisdom is at work in journalist Paula Kamen's interview with a 24-year-old woman who claims she knows her boyfriend far better than her parents knew each other when they married. But would she marry him? No: "Like, are you stupid? Have you read the statistics lately?"

Emerging adults claim to be very stats-savvy about marriage. They are convinced that half of all marriages end in divorce, suggesting that the odds of anyone staying married amounts to a random flip of a coin. In reality, of course, divorce is hardly a random event. Some couples are more likely to divorce than others: people who didn't finish high school, people with little wealth or income, those who aren't religious, African Americans, couples who had children before they married, those who live in the South, those who cohabited before marrying and those who live in neighborhoods that have elevated crime and poverty rates. Lots of emerging adults have a few of these risk factors for divorce, but most don't have numerous factors.

And yet the compelling idea in the minds of many is that any given marriage's chance of success—however defined—is only 50-50, and worse if you marry early. In fact, most Americans who cite the statistics argument against considering marriage in early adulthood tend to misunderstand exactly what "early marriage" is. Most sociological evaluations of early marriage note that the link between age-at-marriage and divorce is strongest among those who marry as teenagers (in other words, before age 20). Marriages that begin at age 20, 21 or 22 are not nearly so likely to end in divorce as most Americans presume. Data from the 2002 National Study of Family Growth suggest that the probability of a marriage lasting at least ten years—hardly a long-term success, but a good benchmark of endurance—hinges not only on age-at-marriage but also on gender.

- Men and women who marry at or before age 20 are by far the worst bets for long-term success.
- The likelihood of a marriage (either a man's or a woman's) lasting ten years exceeds 60 percent beginning at age 21.
- Starting around age 23 (until at least 29), the likelihood of a woman's marriage lasting ten years improves by about 3 percent with each added year of waiting.
- However, no such linear "improvement" pattern appears among men.

The most significant leap in avoiding divorce occurs by simply waiting to marry until age 21. The difference in success between, say, marrying at 23 and marrying at 28 is just not as substantial as many emerging adults believe it to be. And among men, there are really no notable differences to speak of. While sociologist Tim Heaton finds that teenage marriage—and perhaps marriage among 20- and 21-year-olds—carries a higher risk of marital disruption, he too notes that "increasing the age at marriage from 22 to 30 would not have much effect on marital stability."

Still, to most of us, marital success is more than just managing to avoid a divorce. It's about having a good marriage. Sociologist Norval Glenn's study of marital success, in which "failure" is defined as either divorce or being in an unhappy marriage, reveals a curvilinear relationship between age at marriage and marital success. Women who marry before 20 or after 27 report lower marital success, while those marrying at ages 20–27 report higher levels of success. The pattern is a bit different for men. Men who marry before age 20 appear to have only a small chance at a successful marriage, while those who marry between ages 20 and 22 or after age 27 face less daunting but still acute challenges for a successful marriage. The best odds for men are in the middle, at ages 23–27. In a meta-analysis of five different surveys that explored marriage outcomes, researchers note that respondents who marry between ages 22 and 25 express greater marital satisfaction than do those who marry later.

In other words, the conventional wisdom about the obvious benefits to marital happiness of delayed marriage overreaches. Why it is that people who wait into their late twenties and thirties may experience less marital success rather than more is not entirely clear—and the finding itself is subject to debate. But it may be a byproduct of their greater rates of cohabitation. While relationship quality typically declines a bit over the course of marriage, the same process is believed to occur during cohabitation. If so, for many couples who marry at older ages, the "honeymoon" period of their relationship may have ended before they married, not

after.

All these findings, however, are largely lost on emerging adults because of the compelling power of the popular notion in America that marriages carry a 50 percent risk of divorce. Consequently, marriage is considered off-limits to many emerging adults, especially those in the middle of college or building a career. Thus while research suggests that adults who are married and in monogamous relationships report more overall happiness and both more physical and more emotional satisfaction with sex, emerging adults don't believe it. Such claims just don't feel true. And why should they? When was the last time you watched a romantic film about a happily married 40-year-old couple?

This article is adapted from Mark Regnerus's and Jeremy Uecker's book Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying, just published by Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press.