



**AN ABSTINENCE
EDUCATOR'S GUIDE:
MARRYING THE ABSTINENCE
AND MARRIAGE MESSAGE**



**TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE
MODULE**

Abstinence Education Grantees

An Abstinence Educator's Guide: Marrying the Abstinence and Marriage Message

*Technical Assistance Module for
Abstinence Education Grantees*

Written by

Julie Baumgardner, MS, CFLE
First Things First

Edited by Pal-Tech, Inc.

Jon Berg

Abstinence Education Content Specialist

Maureen Cooney

Editor

Under Contract Number GS-10F-0311K
between Pal-Tech, Inc. and
the Family and Youth Services Bureau
Administration for Children, Youth, and Families
Administration for Children and Families

March 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART I: Why Marriage Matters	2
Marriage: Still the Goal	2
Marriage Benefits Society	2
Marriage Benefits Adults	2
Marriage Benefits Children	3
The Negative Effects of Divorce	3
Tackling Current Myths About Marriage	4
PART II: How Abstinence Education Supports Teens' Aspirations for Successful Marriages	6
Know Your Audience: Where Are Teens Coming From?	6
Teens Aspire to Happy, Lifelong Marriages	6
Factors Influencing Teens' Views on Marriage and Abstinence	6
A Mindset for the Future...a Life Script for Success	7
Negative Media Messages about Marriage	7
Risky Behavior that Sabotages Future Relationships	8
The Crux of the Problem...and a Step Toward a Solution	9
Time Well Spent: Developing Relationship Skills Needed for Successful Marriages.....	10
Making Sense of the Abstinence Message: Skills Taught in Context	10
First Comes Living Together then Comes Marriage?.....	12
Cohabitation Myths	12
Helping Teens Reach the Goal of a Healthy Marriage.....	14
PART III: How to Incorporate Marriage into Abstinence Programs	15
Teach Teens the Reality of Marriage.....	15
Teach Appropriate Expectations for Marriage	16
Teach Essential Relationship Skills	16
Incorporate Marriage Content in the Message	19
Get the Marriage Message Out to the Masses	21
Summary	24
APPENDICES	
A: Bibliography	25
B: Suggested Reading	27
C: How to Incorporate "Marriage" into Abstinence Programs	28
D: Evaluating Relationship Skills.....	29
E: Cohabitation Myths.....	31
F: Marriage Myths	32
G: Relationship Myths	33
H: Guide for Abstinence Educators on Authoritative Communities.....	34

INTRODUCTION

This module lays the groundwork for understanding the importance and benefits of marriage for both adults and children. More importantly, for our purposes as abstinence educators, it highlights the crucial role that abstinence education can play in helping teens achieve their expressed goal of having successful marriages as adults. This module is divided into three parts. *Part I: Why Marriage Matters* explains why marriage is beneficial to individuals, families, and society in general. *Part II: How Abstinence Education Supports Teens' Aspirations for Successful Marriages* highlights teens' hesitations and hopes about marriage. It examines how successful abstinence training may increase the likelihood that teens will have happy marriages. *Part III: How to Incorporate Marriage into Abstinence Programs* gives suggestions for offering marriage content in an abstinence program, as well as examples of creative, effective programs that combine abstinence and marriage messaging.

In addition, the module has eight appendices—Appendix A: Bibliography, Appendix B: Suggested Reading, Appendix C: How to Incorporate “Marriage” into Abstinence Programs, Appendix D: Evaluating Relationship Skills, Appendix E: Cohabitation Myths, Appendix F: Marriage Myths, Appendix G: Relationship Myths, and Appendix H: Guide for Abstinence Educators on Authoritative Communities.

This module will provide you with an understanding of the following:

- Why marriage matters;
- What factors influence teens' attitudes towards marriage;
- How successful abstinence education helps students become more likely to achieve their expressed goals of lifelong marriages;

- What content concerning relationships and marriage should be part of an abstinence education program;
- How to get the message out to the masses—communicate abstinence and marriage in different ways to different audiences; and
- Ways in which some abstinence programs successfully combine abstinence and marriage messaging.

For some abstinence educators, the thought of “marrying” abstinence and marriage in the same sentence may seem unusual. However, from the perspective of one who has worked in the trenches for 10 years on both marriage and abstinence education, the connection is clear. The majority of teens I encounter express strong interest in marriage and want to know how to make marriage work over the long haul. Many of them come from homes impacted by divorce. They have felt the pain of divorce and do not want to repeat it. My experience has taught me that sexual abstinence in a pre-marital relationship encourages attitudes and behaviors that later on will contribute to a great marriage. And research supports that observation.

Abstinence has the potential to shape a person's character, producing traits desirable for a healthy marriage. As abstinence educators, we are well poised to make the case for why abstinence matters when preparing for future marriage. In this module, I'll share some of the research supporting the abstinence-marriage connection, as well as field-tested ideas about putting that research into practice.

There is one disclaimer: this module refers to several curricula. These are merely examples. We do not endorse them in particular nor promote them over others. There are a wide variety of curricula available to suit the needs of your own program.

PART I: Why Marriage Matters

Marriage: Still the Goal

Why discuss marriage with teens? Is marriage an outdated, old fashioned institution? Not according to Linda Waite, professor and family scholar at the University of Chicago, and Maggie Gallagher, President of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy. Their research, reported in *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, shows that 93 percent of Americans rate having a happy marriage as either one of their most important or a very important life objective.¹

Recent research continues to support the view that Americans believe in marriage. A study entitled *With This Ring*, conducted by the National Fatherhood Initiative, surveyed 1,503 Americans age 18 and older and found that the vast majority of responders expressed pro-marriage attitudes. Furthermore, 88 percent of those surveyed believed that marriage should be a lifelong commitment. Similar studies confirm that men and women in this country strongly believe in the ideal of marriage.²

Marriage Benefits Society

More than just an ideal, however, marriage benefits both individuals and society. As a universal institution, marriage is the customary way that every modern society has secured for its children the love, attention and resources of his (or her) mother and father.³ Conversely, research consistently shows that the decline of marriage weakens civil society and spreads social inequality.⁴ The decline in two-parent families since 1960 is closely linked with a rise in child poverty, primarily because poverty rates are far higher in single-parent households than in two-parent households. The post-1960 changes in marriage and family formation also appear to deprive children of documented benefits of marriage, such as better physical and emotional health and greater socioeconomic attainment.⁵

According to the Administration for Children and Families Healthy Marriage Initiative website⁶, healthy marriages affect the community as well. Communities derive the following benefits when its members have strong marriages: “(1) higher rates of physically healthy citizens; (2) higher rates of emotionally healthy citizens; (3) lower domestic violence rates; (4) lower crime rates including juvenile delinquency; (5) less teen pregnancy; (6) lower rates of migration; (7) higher property values; and (8) more home ownership.” Not surprisingly, communities with more citizens in healthy marriages require fewer social services.⁷

According to Waite and Gallagher, when society as a whole supports marriage as an institution, we are all better off.⁸ “The decision to marry...is a choice to enter into a larger, more durable bond, which requires social, moral, and legal support. By recognizing the public union of men and women, the larger society helps individuals achieve the goals and gains marriage represents: a supportive partner one can trust, and a safe place for raising children.”⁹

Marriage Benefits Adults

While society gains much from strong marriages, marriage also has a powerful, positive effect on the married couples, according to research conducted by Dr. Waite. “Marriage makes you the most important person in someone else’s life,” wrote Dr. Waite. “It gives you someone to trust, to listen, someone who really cares, and having a confidante is extremely important to help people deal with stress and for their emotional and physical well-being. People in tightly bonded relationships have better health.”¹⁰ Overall, married couples enjoy better health, more happiness, higher earnings (which result in greater accumulated wealth over time), longer life spans, well-adjusted kids, and greater sexual fulfillment than single people.¹¹ Additional research

¹ Waite, Linda J. and Gallagher, Maggie, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*, 2000.

² *With This Ring...A National Survey on Marriage In America*, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005.

³ *The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles*, 2000.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Marriage and Child Wellbeing, The Future of Children*, Volume 15, Number 2, The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and The Brookings Institution, 2005.

⁶ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/benefits/index.html>.

⁷ ACF Healthy Marriage Initiative, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/benefits/index.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Waite, Linda J. and Gallagher, Maggie, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*, 2000.

¹¹ Waite, Linda J., “Does Marriage Matter?” *Demography* 32 (1995): 483-507.

reported by Waite and Gallagher confirms these results. Specifically, they found that married people benefit in so many ways, including the following:

- Better physical health and substantially lower risk of early death and debilitating illness.
- Better emotional health—in a survey of 14,000 people, “marital status was one of the most important predictors of happiness,” with married couples reporting the highest level of happiness, and separated and divorced people reporting the lowest levels of happiness.
- Better financial health, especially over time.
- Greater sexual fulfillment and a dramatically reduced risk that one’s partner will be unfaithful.¹²

While few adults marry based on a cost/benefit analysis (love is the most likely motivation), the benefits of marriage for adults are undeniable.

Marriage Benefits Children

But do the children benefit? Do they derive benefits from their parents’ marriage? Pitirim Sorokin, first chair of the Sociology Department at Harvard in the 1950’s, touted the importance of marriage for children. He wrote that “the most essential sociocultural patterning of a newborn human organism is achieved by the family. It is the first and most efficient sculptor of human material, shaping the physical, behavioral, mental, moral and sociocultural characteristics of practically every individual....From remotest past, married parents have been the most effective teachers of their children.”¹³

A child’s future often depends on the strength of the parenting he receives early on. And the biggest factor in the child’s favor is having married parents. Research shows that children raised in households with their married, biological parents do better than those in one-parent households, particularly in measures of academic and life success. Sara McLanahan, Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, reported that “regardless of which survey we looked at, children from one-parent families are about twice as likely to drop out of school as

children from two-parent families.”¹⁴ On average, children raised in biological two-parent households have higher test scores and grade-point averages, miss fewer school days, and have greater expectations of attending college than children living with one parent. Additionally, children from two-parent households are 7 to 20 percent more likely to finish college.¹⁵ A Child Trends research brief also reports extensive research that shows children do best when they grow up with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage.¹⁶ According to Glenn Stanton, marriage and family advocate, “All things being equal, children with married parents consistently do better in every measure of well-being than their peers who have single, cohabiting, divorced or step-parents, and this is a stronger indicator than parental race, economic or educational status, or neighborhood. The literature on this is broad and strong.”¹⁷

The Negative Effects of Divorce

Divorce research highlights not only the problems that result when marriages fall apart, but also, by comparison, the benefits when parents stay married. Children from divorced homes are 70 percent more likely than those living with their biological, married parents to be expelled or suspended from school. Those living with never-married mothers are twice as likely to be expelled or suspended. In addition, children who do not live with both biological, married parents are 45 to 95 percent more likely to require parent/teacher meetings to deal with performance or behavioral problems than those who live with married parents.¹⁸ According to a 2000 study, compared to children raised by widowed mothers, children from divorced single-

¹² Waite, L.J. and Gallagher, M., *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*, 2000.

¹³ Pitirim, Sorokin, *Society, Culture, and Personality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1947, pp. 246-247; *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956: 5).

¹⁴ McLanahan, Sara, Donahue, Elisabeth, and Haskins, Ron (eds.), “Introducing the Issue,” *The Future of Children* “Marriage and Child Wellbeing,” Volume 15, Number 2, Brookings Press, 2005.

¹⁵ McLanahan, Sara and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994: 19.

¹⁶ Moore, Kristin Anderson, et al., “Marriage from a Child’s Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do About It?” Child Trends Research Brief, June 2002: 1.

¹⁷ Stanton, Glenn T, “Why Marriage Matters for Children,” Focus on the Family article <http://www.family.org/socialissues/A000001127.cfm#>.

¹⁸ Dawson, Deborah, “Family Structure and Children’s Health and Well-being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 573-584.

mother homes are significantly less likely to either complete high school or attend and graduate from college.¹⁹

Moreover, children raised by parents in healthy marriages enjoy better relationships with their parents, demonstrate fewer behavioral problems, and are less likely to take part in delinquent behaviors²⁰ than children raised in single parent homes. In addition, children of married parents have a lower risk of living in poverty.

Challenges of Single Parenting

It is important to mention here that many single parents, under extremely difficult circumstances, make valiant efforts to raise their children well—and their children reflect that. Most single parents will tell you, however, that they feel “there’s not enough of me to go around,” when it comes to work, discipline, or being present at sporting and school events. Parenting is a difficult job, as indicated by research and as all parents know firsthand, one typically better performed when a child’s mother and father are together.

Tackling Current Myths About Marriage

Myths about marriage perpetuate. Whether communicated by the media or passed on as part of conventional wisdom, certain misperceptions continue to present a skewed view of marriage to parents and teens. These oft-repeated ideas have gained the status of “truth” within our society, even in the face of contradictory data. And yet these myths often shape teens’ views on marriage.

In *The Case for Marriage*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher identify five commonly-held myths about marriage:²¹

Myth 1: Divorce is usually the best answer for kids when a marriage becomes unhappy.

Reality: The authors discovered that the vast majority of “bad marriages” that don’t end in divorce

eventually become good marriages. In a study of couples in “bad” marriages who chose to stay together, 86 percent reported five years later that their marriages had turned around and were now happier. In fact, 60 percent said their marriages had become “very happy.”

Additionally, only 30 percent of marriages that end in divorce are high-conflict marriages where children say they are thankful that the fighting has stopped. In the other 70 percent, the couples cite disconnectedness or not being in love anymore as the reason for the divorce. But for a child, his parents’ happiness is less important than having his family together. Many children harbor dreams about divorced parents reuniting—even many years later.

Myth 2: Marriage is primarily for the benefit of children.

Reality: Both children and adults benefit from marriage. Marriage is an important social institution that provides benefits in virtually every indicator the social sciences can measure.

Myth 3: Marriage is good for men, but bad for women.

Reality: A balanced look at the research shows that married men and women both report less anxiety and depression, higher self-esteem, more financial stability, and a much higher level of happiness. The research is compelling: people do better when they get married and stay married.

Myth 4: Promoting marriage puts women at risk for violence.

Reality: In fact, the opposite is true: married couples are less likely to be victims of interpersonal violence. In studies of domestic violence between partners, married couples are much less likely than cohabiting couples to say that arguments between them became violent (4 percent married, 13 percent cohabiting).

Myth 5: Marriage is a private affair of the heart between two adults.

Reality: Marriage is a public, legally binding, and often religiously supported promise that two people will stay together and act as a team their entire lives. “Marriage changes the way they see themselves, and

¹⁹ Browning, Katharine, et.al., “Highlights of Findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study,” OJJDP Fact Sheet 103, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, April 1999.

²⁰ “Healthy Marriage Initiative: Bringing Real Solutions to Real People,” National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2005 <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/healthmarrbk.pdf>.

²¹ Waite, Linda J. and Gallagher, Maggie, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*, 2000: 4.

it changes the way other people see them and treat them,” Waite says. “It also strengthens the bonds between children and their father’s side of the family.”

We need to encourage teens to think critically about marriage, to learn the facts so they can choose well, and to

sift through the messages from their peers, society, and the media. The research is clear. Most adults retain a positive view of marriage and bring to it the hope that theirs will be a permanent, happy relationship. And marriage itself yields benefits to society, the couple, and their children.

PART II: How Abstinence Education Supports Teens' Aspirations for Successful Marriages

Know Your Audience: Where Are Teens Coming From?

While research clearly demonstrates the benefits of marriage, and Americans of all social classes and ethnic groups value marriage,²² the teen perspective on marriage is mixed. On the one hand, teens as a group state a desire for eventual lifelong marriage. On the other hand, many teens have an inaccurate view of what it takes to build a strong marriage, hesitancy about their own prospects for a good marriage, and a disconnect between the behaviors they pursue and the effects of those behaviors on their future prospects for a happy marriage. Moreover, they may fail to understand the specific connection between abstinence and marriage. As abstinence educators, we need to provide context for the abstinence decision and help teens make the vital connection between abstinence now and their long-range goals, including marriage.

Teens Aspire to Happy, Lifelong Marriages

A recent survey in California of 600 16- to 22-year-olds conducted by New America Media found that marriage and parenthood are at the top of the list when it comes to life goals. In a related way, these teens view family breakdown, neighborhood violence, and poverty as the most pressing issues facing their generation.²³ The 2001 Monitoring the Future survey found that 88 percent of male high-school seniors and 93 percent of female high-school seniors believe it is extremely or quite important to have a good marriage and family life. Nearly all teens (93 percent) expect that they will get married, and 91 percent say that if they get married they would like to have children.²⁴ Families Northwest's 2001 Teen Relationships Report revealed that 88 percent of teens in Washington State expressed an interest in getting married someday, and 93 percent believe marriage is meant to be a lifelong relationship. These findings mirror those of

other youth polls, including the Teen Survey.²⁵ Clearly teens, like adults, aspire to have happy, lifelong marriages.

Factors Influencing Teens' Views on Marriage and Abstinence

Even though teens generally intend to build strong marriages as adults, several factors affect those good intentions and the realistic possibility of carrying them out. These factors include experiences within the teen's own family, the life script internalized by the teen, media messages, and sexual behaviors common to teens.

The Influence of Family and the Legacy of Divorce

The Families Northwest's Teen Relationship Report revealed that teens consider their parents to be a major influence on their future relationships. Nearly half of all teens look to their parents as the "single most significant influence on their thinking about what it will take to have a good marriage."²⁶ While parents in healthy marriages demonstrate and teach their children by their actions such things as effective relationship skills, parents in unhealthy marriages or divorced parents may leave a different imprint on their teens.

Judith Wallerstein's book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, squarely confronts the impact of divorce. Many children of divorce fear making the same mistake their parents did. "I'm afraid to use the word love, you can hope for it, but you can't expect it," said one young adult. Further, Dr. Wallerstein observes that children of divorce often don't know where to start when it comes to looking for a life mate.²⁷ Marriage seems to be something that young people yearn for, but fear will be unattainable.²⁸ My conversations

²² The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles, 2000.

²³ Youth Poll, New America Media, 2007.

²⁴ Survey Research Center, "Monitoring the Future Survey" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001)

²⁵ Teen Survey, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007.

²⁶ "Teen Relationship: Teens Talk on Parents, Marriage and Sex," Families Northwest, Bellevue, Washington, 2001.

²⁷ Wallerstein, Judith, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study*, 2000.

²⁸ Hymowitz, Kay S, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, 2006.

with young people reflect this duality. They frequently talk about how complicated marriage seems and how little they understand the opposite sex. Yet, they still want to figure out how to make it work.

Research conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide in 1999 discovered that the legacy of dysfunctional families extends to the marriages and families of the next generation. Couples often want to have healthy, long-lasting marriages and to be engaged parents, but feel ill-equipped to do so.²⁹ Many couples in the study specifically stated that their goal was to marry for life and to be a good parent, but felt hampered in reaching that goal because of their own upbringing. Raised by a single parent or by parents who argued constantly, these children grew up without positive examples of collaborative relationships. Parents who have poor relationships with each other or who are disengaged from their children transfer these problems to their own children. They, in turn, fail to learn essential relationship skills, and as adults tend to struggle in their relationships with the opposite sex. Thus, the cycle is perpetuated.

Some teens who grew up in a household run by a single parent may feel disloyal or conflicted by the evidence supporting the benefits of the two-parent family. We need to acknowledge the Herculean efforts of many single parents to raise their children well. I know many single parents, including my own mother, who have done an exceptional job raising their children. It is important to recognize and commend them for heroically raising children alone. We need to be both sensitive to those who grew up in single-parent households and realistic with young people about the challenges of single parenthood. The research is unequivocal: the best environment for a child growing up is a loving home with his or her married biological parents.³⁰ In the end, we need to encourage teens to strive for the ideal, which is marriage.

A Mindset for the Future...a Life Script for Success

At every turn, young people tell us that marriage matters to them and they want to succeed at it. But to succeed at marriage, they've got to get there first. Sociologists speak of an internalized "life script" that refers "to the sense individuals have of the timing and progression of the major

events of their lives."³¹ As Kay Hymowitz points out in her influential book, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*,³² it is easy to "assume that everyone is born internally programmed to follow the middle-class life script," which promotes education, maturity, financial independence, marriage and then child-rearing. However, among poorer segments of the population, this life script is not a given. "With less adult involvement in their daily activities and decisions...the mainstream rites of maturity—college, first apartment, first serious job—hold little emotional meaning..." For many underclass teens, marriage is often viewed as "irrelevant, vestigial."³³

As educators, this is one place where we can make a difference. Teens who lack significant parental oversight or involvement in their lives especially need adult guidance and encouragement. More specifically, they need our "prodding and example," to help them develop the habits of "orderliness, discipline, foresight, and...willingness to delay gratification."³⁴ Abstinence education is a part of this. Abstinence requires self-control, a view to the future, and an ability to forego pleasure now for the sake of a bigger, more rewarding goal later.

Teens who commit to abstinence are in a better position to appreciate that some "life scripts"³⁵ are more successful than others. Research shows that the best approach is to graduate from high school, wait until marriage to have a baby, and delay marriage until they are at least in their twenties. Young people who follow this sequence greatly reduce the likelihood of both poverty and divorce.³⁶ Teens who lack an orientation toward the future and who lack the habitual ability to delay gratification, control themselves, and consider the impact of their actions on others, are less likely to be abstinent and may exhibit behaviors that can jeopardize any future marriage.

Negative Media Messages about Marriage

In spite of the overwhelming research, which shows that marriage benefits both adults and children, the

³¹ Hymowitz, Kay S., *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, 2006. Ivan R. Dee, Chicago: 109-123.

³² Hymowitz: 109.

³³ Hymowitz: 110.

³⁴ Hymowitz: 117.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marlene Pearson, personal interview, September 2004.

²⁹ Hamilton County Marriage Report, First Things First, 1999.

³⁰ Maher, Bridget, *The Family Portrait: A Compilation of Data, Research and Public Opinion on the Family*, 2004: 20-23.

entertainment industry often portrays marriage negatively. Some teens in my experience express apprehension towards marriage as a direct result of what they see and hear. One teen confided that she heard marriage is like “selling your soul,” and would cause her to lose her identity. Other negative messages abound. Television, movies, and the Internet often cast marriage as an irrelevant, outmoded institution; an optional context for childbearing; a 50/50 proposition in terms of success; boring (especially in comparison to the supposedly exciting sex lives of singles); only for old or religious people; and a vehicle to suppress women.

The impact the media has on teens is vast. It affects their daily lives, marinating them in messages that undercut commitment to responsible sexual behavior. “According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, children spend almost as much time using media as most adults do working.”³⁷ In addition, “[r]esearchers estimate that before reaching college, ‘American adolescents spend about eight hours a day listening to recorded music, watching TV, going to the movies, using the Internet and reading magazines.’”³⁸

Also, many of the images on TV, on the Internet, in movies and in music are sex-saturated, but not marriage-friendly. For example, more than 70 percent of adolescents regularly watch MTV. According to the Parents Television Council, “[d]uring 171 hours of programming, content aired on MTV showed 1,548 sexual scenes containing 3,056 depictions of sex or various forms of nudity,” and “2,881 verbal references to sex,”³⁹ many of which were not in the context of marriage. And MTV is not an isolated example. Soap operas are “twenty-four times more likely to show sexual activity between unmarried people than married couples.”⁴⁰ A popular show among many teens, *Girls Gone Wild*, showcases the casual sexual mores of college girls away on spring break. It is an example of the kind of show singled out in 2006 by the American Medical Association for encouraging dangerous sexual liaisons among teens.⁴¹ One other 2005 study, *Sex on TV 4*, conducted by the Kaiser

Family Foundation, reported that “the number of sexual scenes on television had doubled since 1998.” Even worse, “the percentage of scenes showing characters having sex after they had just met had doubled between 2002 and 2005.”⁴²

The “sex without consequences” message doesn’t just undermine the culture of marriage; it has real consequences for teens. A “2004 report by the RAND Corporation, a non-profit research group that surveyed approximately 1,800 twelve to seventeen-year-olds found that sexually-charged television programs definitely influence teens to have sex...RAND reported that teens who watched more sexual content were also more likely to initiate sexual activity and to progress to more advanced sexual acts.”⁴³

The present media environment, especially in entertainment, presents a formidable obstacle to the abstinence message. To create a pro-marriage—and pro-abstinence—culture among teens, abstinence educators must recognize the false impressions and misinformation generated by the media that is absorbed daily by teens.

Risky Behavior that Sabotages Future Relationships

Fueled by the media, their own hormones, and mixed messages about marriage and sexuality, teens increasingly engage in problematic sexual behaviors, creating habits that could spell disaster when it comes time to marry. “Hooking-up” is a case in point. Journalist Laura Sessions Stepp spent years interviewing teens and college-age girls about it. She confirms what the research tells us: girls want to get married and have children but many of them “don’t plan to find the groom until their late twenties or early thirties” and “see no reason to practice being a loving partner before then.”⁴⁴ Stepp notes that “[t]he interval between when a girl enters puberty and when she marries [is]...an average of more than thirteen years. That’s a long time to wait to have sex.”⁴⁵ Especially when the teen culture glamorizes sexual activity and suggests that indeed “everyone is doing it.” One motivation for hooking up, according to Stepp, is that “[h]ooking up enables a young woman to practice a piece of a relationship, the physical, while devoting most of her

³⁷ Tomeo, Teresa, *Noise: How Our Media-Saturated Culture Dominates Lives and Dismantles Families*, 2007 Ascension Press, West Chester, PA: 146, citing National Institute on Media and the Family, “Children and Family Fact Sheet,” www.mediafamily.org.

³⁸ Stepp, Laura Sessions, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*, 2007 Riverhead Books, NY: 44.

³⁹ Tomeo: 95, citing 2004 Parents Television Council survey.

⁴⁰ Tomeo: 66.

⁴¹ Tomeo: 23.

⁴² Stepp: 44.

⁴³ Tomeo: 66.

⁴⁴ Stepp: 37.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

energy to” other things like academics, sports and part-time jobs. In general, high achievers feel like they don’t have time to develop emotional relationships, but they do make time to hook up.

The hook up culture, however, has profound implications for the teen’s later ability to enter into sustained, caring relationships. Lloyd Kolbe, the health education professor at Indiana University, notes that, “Hooking up is purposely uncaring...If they turn off the emotional spigot during this time, what will happen to them as older adults?” While not taking a moral position on pre-marital intercourse, he is concerned that “if we’re treated in an uncaring way by others over and over again, we will likely respond in kind. The effect down the road could be exponential.”⁴⁶

Hooking up is not the only problematic behavior. A 2002 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that “55% of 15- to 19-year-old boys and 54% of girls reported getting or giving oral sex, compared with 49% of boys and 53% of girls who reported having had intercourse.”⁴⁷ More troubling than the numbers, however, are the attitudes underlying these behaviors. Many teens maintain their status as “technical virgins,”⁴⁸ while engaging in oral sex. For them, oral sex doesn’t qualify as “sex.” As one 19-year-old put it, “For most teens, the only form of sex is penetration, and anything else doesn’t count. You can have oral sex and be a virgin.”⁴⁹ As one researcher noted, “One-quarter of teens who have not had intercourse have had oral sex...the implications are that teens who define themselves as abstinent may be engaging in oral sex.”⁵⁰

Experts wonder if teens who take such a casual view of oral sex may be affected in their ability to have intimate relationships. Author David Walsh observes that for many teens, oral sex “just becomes kind of a recreational activity that is separate from a close, personal relationship... When the physical part of the relationship races ahead of everything else, it can almost become the focus of the relationship and they’re not then developing all of the really important skills like trust and communication and all those

things that are the key ingredients for a healthy, long-lasting relationship.”⁵¹ Other experts note that girls in particular suffer emotionally from such non-relationships⁵² and both sexes grow to mistrust each other.⁵³

In some places, “hooking up” and “hanging out” have replaced traditional dating.⁵⁴ But even where they have not, teens often don’t know how to acquire or practice the skills that will sustain good relationships. Although most teens aspire to marriage, some lack confidence that they have, or will acquire, the proper skills. Other teens are over confident in their ability to find a spouse and enjoy deep, loving relationships later in life—assuming they will do so automatically and without effort. They fail to realize that years of superficial relationships and self-gratifying sexual encounters may affect their ability to become a generous, loving partner—and to expect the same of a future spouse.

In either scenario, teens who fail to learn the skills required for a successful relationship will find it much harder to realize their stated goal of eventual, permanent marriage. In the past, parents and extended family provided their children with guidance and teens often sought their parents’ approval of the person they were dating. Now, many young people find themselves on their own when it comes to dating discernment. Worse, sitcoms and movies create unrealistic expectations of dating and marriage, clouding teens’ ability to perceive reality when it comes to relationships. Teens lack information about how to date, the purpose of dating, and the qualities and skills of healthy dating relationships. Adults must step in, educate young people, and offer support. I have heard many newlyweds say they had no idea how hard it would be to adjust to living with someone else. Research on relationships makes it clear that the earlier the intervention, the better the results.⁵⁵

The Crux of the Problem...and a Step Toward a Solution

It’s clear that marriage is good for society, adults, and children, and it is also evident that teens aspire to

⁴⁶ Stepp: 242.

⁴⁷ *Teens define sex in new ways*, by Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY, October 19, 2005.

⁴⁸ *‘Technical Virginity’ becomes part of teens’ equation*, by Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY, October 19, 2005.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Teens define sex in new ways*, by Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY, October 19, 2005.

⁵² Stepp: 24-25.

⁵³ Hymowitz: 114.

⁵⁴ Marquardt, Elizabeth and Noval, Glenn D., *Hooking Up, Hanging Out and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Mating and Dating Today*, Institute for American Values Report, 200.1

⁵⁵ Interview with Marlene Pearson, September 2004

experience strong, lifelong marriages. The crux of the issue, however, is how to help them achieve their goal. Abstinence education, while certainly not the entire answer, can play a significant part in the solution. The media barrages teens with sexual images while sending unrealistic messages about relationships. Divorce and difficult family situations create hesitancy and apprehension towards relationships. And teens' own sexual behaviors create patterns of relating that may prove problematic later on as they become more marriage-minded. We need to help teens see the relationship between what they do now and their happiness later on—in particular we need to discuss abstinence in the context of eventual marriage. Being sexually abstinent frees teens to work on the relationship skills that they will need for a healthy marriage. Moreover, teens avoid building up destructive relationship habits—ones that potentially could stunt their ability to have mature emotional relationships later on.

Time Well Spent: Developing Relationship Skills Needed for Successful Marriages

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marlene Pearson make a strong case for teaching young people about healthy relationships, which includes teaching them about the value and significance of waiting to have sex and avoiding risky sexual behavior, in *Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy and Marriage*. Teens need to understand Whitehead and Pearson's "success sequencing:" doing the right things at the right time, in the right order. Whitehead and Pearson hold that the logical order for life's major milestones is critically important: get an education, get married, then have children. They argue that combining teenage pregnancy prevention with relationship skills will ensure that more children will be born into families with two happily married parents who are ready to take on the challenging job of parenting.⁵⁶

Dr. John Van Epp, psychologist and author of the book and marriage program, *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, also believes young people need to follow a certain sequence in relationships in order to increase their chances of having a healthy marriage. Many teens and young adults move too quickly in relationships, inadvertently sabotaging the long-term potential of those relationships;⁵⁷ for example,

by getting too close too soon through early sexual activity. The media, peers, and even some adults tell teens that premarital sex will not affect their future relationships. As abstinence educators, we know that becoming sexually active early in a relationship actually impedes the process of getting to know each other.

Dr. Van Epp's concept of the relationship attachment model applies sequencing to romantic relationships. He advises teaching young people about five bonding dynamics—(1) know, (2) trust, (3) rely, (4) commit, and (5) physical touch. "Think of this like a stereo mixing board where each one of these bonding dynamics is a slider that goes up and down," said Dr. Van Epp. "There is a certain safe zone that will protect you from the 'love is blind' syndrome. You should never let one level exceed the previous. For example, the level of your sexual involvement should never exceed your level of commitment, which should never exceed your level of reliance. Your level of reliance should not exceed the trust picture you develop and that should not go beyond what you know about that person in the key areas."

Making Sense of the Abstinence Message: Skills Taught in Context

Teens need to learn relationship skills over time in order to help them achieve their goal of lifelong, happy marriages. And whether married or single, it is imperative that those of us who work with young people invest in relationship skills training/curricula⁵⁸ ourselves. I know I need to be intentional about keeping my own marriage healthy. No one is perfect; we can all use help making our relationships stronger and improving our communication skills. And then we are better equipped to pass these skills on to young people.

Whitehead and Pearson observe that helping young people develop healthy, meaningful relationships, as opposed to superficial ones, has been the missing ingredient in programs geared

...at delaying sexual activity, avoiding teen pregnancy, and helping prepare young people for successful marriages. Teens hear about biology and body parts, they are instructed on how to reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,

⁵⁶ Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe and Pearson, Marlene, *Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy and Marriage*, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006

⁵⁷ Van Epp, J., *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, McGraw-Hill: 2006.

⁵⁸ Excellent curricula are available at the following websites (among many others): <http://www.smartmarriages.com/index.html>, <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>, and <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthy-marriage/>

but rarely are they given guidance about how to successfully navigate the minefields of teen... relationships. In short, young people are often told what to avoid, but hardly ever told how to achieve responsible and respectful relationships... we need to address what motivates teens and appeal to their aspirations rather than continue to simply try to help them manage risks.⁵⁹

In other words, successful abstinence education must focus more on teaching teens how to have responsible and respectful relationships than on managing risks.

Having a successful marriage is not the luck of the draw. Certain skills increase a teen's chances of choosing a good marriage partner and thriving in that marriage over time.⁶⁰ For example, a teen with strong conflict resolution and communication skills who seeks these characteristics in a potential partner is more likely to make a good choice. We need to encourage teens to analyze the characteristics and values of the other person, ensuring they align with their own priorities. It is important to learn one's own individual style before trying to blend with someone else's. Young people also need to learn what it is like to live on their own—being responsible for the rent, the car payment, and expenses such as food and bills. Responsibility hastens maturity. And maturity brings the insight necessary to choose a life partner.

The Families Northwest 2001 Teen Relationship Report revealed that teens consider their parents a major influence on their future relationships. Nearly half of all teens look to their parents as the “single most significant influence on their thinking about what it will take to have a good marriage.”⁶¹ Parents in healthy marriages teach their children effective relationship skills daily by their actions. For example, children learn to respect themselves and others if their parents treat each other and their children with respect. Sons learn how to treat women respectfully by watching their fathers interact with their mothers.

Parents who have good communication and conflict resolution skills show their children how to talk to others

and how to resolve problems in constructive ways. “When parents praise or compliment each other, they send a message of value that is fully absorbed by the child,” writes marriage and family therapist Judith P. Siegel, associate professor at the New York University Ehrenkranz School of Social Work and author of *What Children Learn from their Parents' Marriage*.

When parents demean each other, they create discomfort and conflict in the child. If we want to teach the next generation positive lessons of love, what can we do to teach our children that relationships are a treasure? The positive interactions most visible to children are physical affection, friendship, appreciation, laughter, open-mindedness, flexibility and forgiveness. They learn how to communicate and resolve conflicts from parents, stepparents and other adult role models. The examples they observe from the earliest ages make lasting impressions that influence their behavior as they grow older and begin to form relationships with the opposite sex. We can be thankful that teens have decided marriage matters to them. They want successful, lifelong marriages and we have to remember they are looking to adults to provide them with the blueprints to build healthy relationships that last.⁶²

Building an emotionally healthy marriage takes skill. Children who live in a home where parents model good communication, healthy problem-solving skills, good money management and constructive conflict resolution have a head start on learning those skills. The opposite is also true. Children who grow up in a home where communication between the parents and children is lacking and problem solving consists of hitting, yelling, or using the silent treatment will grow up believing that is how relationships work. As abstinence educators, we must meet provide the tools for a successful journey towards, and within, marriage. If we do these things, young people can be confident knowing that when they meet the person they want to marry, they will be able to make healthy decisions to form lasting relationships.

In its most profound sense, though, teens learn how to love by being loved. “The ways of love, it seems, must be learned, not from decision-making or abstinence classes, not from watching soap operas or...from listening to rap

⁵⁹ <http://www.smartmarriages.com/index.html>, <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>, and <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/>

⁶⁰ Markman, H., Floyd, F., Stanley, S. and Storaasli, R., “Prevention of Marital Distress: A Longitudinal Investigation,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, v56, n2, p. 210-217, 1988

⁶¹ “Teen Relationship: Teens Talk on Parents, Marriage and Sex,” *Families Northwest*, Bellevue, Washington, 2001

⁶² Siegel, Judith P., *What Children Learn from their Parents' Marriage*, 2000

music, but through the lived experience of loving and being loved.”⁶³ We can help there, too. Our genuine caring and love for those we serve can make a huge difference in their futures.

First Comes Living Together then Comes Marriage?

Teens need good relationship skills to have successful relationships. And they need to be loved. So why isn't encouraging cohabitation part of the solution, too? Won't cohabitation increase their likelihood of choosing the right mate and practicing the skills needed for a lifelong, happy marriage? No, because cohabitation does not work as a preparation for marriage. But many adolescents simply do not know the facts. A survey of teenagers by the University of Michigan found that 64% of boys and 57% of girls agreed that “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along.”⁶⁴ Teens often believe that a cohabiting relationship is the best way to judge whether a partner will be a good spouse. They profess assurance that cohabitation will allow them to hone their relationship skills before marriage and that it will lead to a lifelong partnership.

Several years ago, I led a focus group on cohabitation at a local college campus. We asked the students to tell us their views on living together before marriage and its consequences. They sat up straight in their seats and, with great sincerity and confidence, told us that they were sure cohabitation was a good way to discover whether to marry someone. They were shocked when we informed them that the research shows otherwise. One female student, so upset by what she heard, spoke up plaintively. “I come from a family of divorce. I thought I was doing all the right things to make my relationship work. If living together doesn't help make a relationship work then I want you to tell me what does.”

Research suggests that cohabitation rarely ever leads to long-term marriages. The Statistics from the National Survey of Families and Households show that out of 100 couples living together, only 55 will actually get married. Out of the 55 couples, only 12 will still be married a decade later. Additionally, according to the research, “Two-thirds of American children born to co-habiting parents who later

marry will see their parents split up by the time they are ten. Those born within wedlock face only half that risk.”⁶⁵

Dr. Stanley, co-director of the Centre for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver and co-author of “Sliding Versus Deciding” explains why couples tend to cohabit. “Couples start living together because it is more fun (and cheaper) than living apart. One partner may see this as a prelude to marriage. The other—usually the man—may see it as something more temporary. Since no explicit commitment is made, it is easier to drift into living together than it is to drift into marriage. But once a couple begins living together, it is harder to split up than if they were merely dating. So ‘many of these men end up married to women they would not have married if they hadn't been living together.’”⁶⁶

Experts in the field contend that living together is basically a “pretend marriage,” very different from the reality of being married. Cohabiting couples tend to be less committed than married couples. Without the vow of permanence, every major conflict is an occasion for insecurity. Will the relationship last? Is this disagreement the “deal-breaker?” Unlike cohabitation, the marriage commitment provides the impetus to work through conflicts.

Many experts, in fact, contend that the behaviors learned in cohabitation are the very ones that get in the way of a successful marriage. For instance, cohabiting couples often have conflicts about independence—each staking out how much money and time is their own. Marriage, in contrast, is characterized by interdependence. In most marriages, couples pool at least some of their money, have a joint checking account, and to some degree make joint decisions about how money will be spent. In cohabiting relationships, couples usually divide up the bills and have separate checking accounts. When a surprise bill arrives, conflict may ensue because the couple thinks more along the lines of “mine” versus “yours,” instead of “ours.”

Cohabitation Myths

At First Things First, we published a brochure that discussed several myths about cohabitation, as well as the facts.

⁶³ Hymowitz: 123.

⁶⁴ The Economist, “Marriage in America: The Frayed Knot,” May 2007 http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9218127

⁶⁵ The Economist, “Marriage in America: The Frayed Knot,” May 2007 http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9218127

⁶⁶ Stanley, Scott, “Sliding versus Deciding” presentation at Smart Marriages, 2006 [direct quote from *The Economist* article, *Marriage in America: The Frayed Knot*, May 2007].

Myth: Sharing finances and expenses will make things easier on our relationship.

Fact: Disputes often center on money—for any couple. Couples who live together have more financial issues to resolve. Conflicts arise over who is responsible for which bill and whether one partner has any right to tell the other how to spend his or her money. Instead of thinking in terms of “we” when it comes to money, most cohabiters think along the lines of “yours” and “mine.”

Myth: Marriage is just a piece of paper, so cohabiting is really no different from being married.

Fact: Legally, marriage is a binding commitment. It involves paperwork, but it is paperwork that signifies a deep commitment to the relationship and to each other. Emotionally, physically, and spiritually, marriage is a contract of commitment. Living together does not bring the same benefits to the relationship that marriage does. In fact, cohabiting couples tend to resemble singles because they are often less committed to the relationship.⁶⁷ Viewing marriage as only a legal arrangement strips it of its meaning and sets the relationship up for failure. If couples do not view marriage as a loving, committed relationship, divorce is almost inevitable.

Myth: Your sex life ends when you get married.

Fact: According to a large-scale national study, married couples have both more and better sex than do their unmarried counterparts.⁶⁸ Not only do they have sex more often but they enjoy it more, both physically and emotionally. The level of sexual satisfaction is lower among couples who live together than for married couples. Also, couples who live together tend to be less faithful to their partners than married couples.

⁶⁷ Nock, Stephen L., “A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships” *Journal of Family Issues* 16-1 (1995): 53-76.

⁶⁸ Waite, Linda J. and Joyner, Kara, “Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?” pp. 239-269 in E.O. Laumann and R.T. Michael, eds., *Sex, Love, and Health in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); E.O. Laumann, J.H. Gagnon, R.T. Michael and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Myth: Cohabitation is the real deal; it’s just like being married.

Fact: Many people enter a cohabiting relationship hoping it will lead to marriage; however, living together isn’t always a stepping-stone to marriage. Researchers from the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University tracked cohabiting couples over a five to seven year period. They found that only 46 percent of cohabiting relationships are considered “precursors to marriage,” meaning those in which couples have definite plans to get married. The rest are trial marriages (15 percent), co-residential dating (29 percent), and substitutes for marriage (10 percent). After five to seven years, only 40 percent of all cohabiting couples had married, while 39 percent had separated and 21 percent still lived together.⁶⁹

Myth: Living together is best if there are children involved.

Fact: The effects of cohabitation on children are significant. Children in these situations are at risk of emotional and social difficulties, performing poorly in school, having early premarital sex and having difficulty forming permanent emotional attachments in adulthood. If the man in the household is not the biological father, the children are at greater risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse.

The *State of Our Unions: 2007* found that teenagers’ desire to have “a good marriage and family life” has increased slightly over the past few decades. Surprisingly, acceptance of premarital cohabitation has dropped significantly.⁷⁰ Perhaps the message is getting through to more teens: living together before marriage actually decreases the chance of having a successful, healthy, lifelong marriage. Personally, I have noticed a definite increase in the past few years in the number of high school and college age students who, when asked if it is a good idea to live together before marriage, respond by saying “No.” Just a few years ago when I posed that question to a class, the vast majority felt otherwise. It’s a good start.

⁶⁹ Casper, Lynne M. and Bianchi, Suzanne M., “Continuity and Change in the American Family” (California: Sage Publications, 2002): 59.

⁷⁰ Popenoe, David and Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, “The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America,” 2007, National Marriage Project, Rutgers University.

Helping Teens Reach the Goal of a Healthy Marriage

Based on my work with teens and parents, I know many teens have been encouraged by friends and even some parents to “sow your wild oats.” They erroneously believe that the decisions they make today won’t affect their future. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the number of sexual partners and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), to births outside of marriage and alcohol and drug use, many adolescent behaviors impact future relationships, fertility and overall quality of life.⁷¹

According to the study, “Hardwired to Connect,” teens need the support of authoritative communities to help them negotiate the current crisis of childhood disconnectedness and improve their lives. Appendix H explains the results of the study and defines 10 characteristics of authoritative communities. Abstinence educators can use this information to help alleviate this crisis.

Drs. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, who run the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, developed *Ten Things Teens Should Know About Marriage*.⁷² This brochure provides an excellent outline for a classroom discussion on what teens should know about marriage.

According to Drs. Popenoe and Dafoe Whitehead, a teen who lives by these suggestions maximizes his chances of eventually having a healthy, lifelong marriage. The Top 10 include the following:

1. Make marriage a top goal for your life.
2. Learn relationship skills.
3. Get as much education as you can before you get married.
4. Wait to have sex at least until you finish high school and possibly until your wedding day.
5. Marry in your twenties or older.
6. Wait to have a child until after you are married and at least 20 years old.
7. Be picky when you choose your husband or wife.
8. Think twice before you decide to live with someone outside of marriage.
9. Build a relationship with an adult you can trust and work on strengthening that relationship.
10. Before you marry, take a premarital education course with your partner.

Our choices affect our future. Many people tell me their dating experiences in high school and college affect their current dating relationship or marriage. We need to tell young people that there is no substitute for time when it comes to getting to know someone. A person’s family of origin, no matter how distant or estranged, leaves an imprint on a person. Just as past choices affect teens, family experiences affect their current and future relationships. As abstinence educators, we can help teens understand the significance of all of these influences. More than that, we can help them make good and healthy choices now so that they will maximize their chances for happiness in the future—with a loving spouse, in a committed, faithful marriage.

⁷¹ Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, Keynote Address at Smart Marriages, Happy Families Conference 2006.

⁷² Popenoe, D. and Whitehead, B. Dafoe, “Ten Things Teens Should Know about Marriage,” The Dibble Fund for Marriage Education, 2003.

PART III: How to Incorporate Marriage into Abstinence Programs

Given the importance of marriage and the crucial relationship between abstinence and teens' desire to have successful marriages, our next step is to focus on ways to incorporate marriage content into abstinence programs.

Teach Teens the Reality of Marriage

We must explain to teens that marriage affects not only adults, but also children and society as a whole. Begin by defining the goal: "A healthy marriage is a safe, secure, loving relationship that is built on friendship, passion, and commitment. Healthy marriages are strong relationships that can handle life's ups and downs. They are partnerships based on respect, trust and a willingness to communicate and resolve differences. They also help each individual grow as a person."⁷³

Qualities of a healthy marriage include the following: (1) enjoying each other's company, (2) committing to the relationship, (3) sharing in decision making, (4) being trustworthy, (5) accepting responsibility for actions and behaviors, (6) sharing interests, (7) having realistic expectations of the relationship, (8) sharing a mutual respect for each other, (9) encouraging each other, (10) living within one's means, (11) working to problem solve in a constructive manner, and (12) communicating effectively.

In my experience, teens who have not grown up within a healthy family grounded on a strong marriage participate in risky behavior because they don't hold out much hope for the future. Many of them live in violent areas of town and don't even know anyone who is married. To them, the future means surviving until tomorrow. If they are worried about being alive tomorrow, abstinence and a future marriage pales in comparison. We need to make the information meaningful, so that they will make responsible decisions that positively affect their futures. It helps to point out that risky behavior can have immediate consequences. For example, a young woman worried whether she is pregnant may be unable to focus on her exams. A young male high-

school student, preoccupied with the unwelcome news that he has contracted an STI, might cut class or fail an exam.

Ask teens to envision their future spouse. Most teens will list certain expectations, which tend to differ according to the teen's gender. Over the years, I've noticed that male teens often say something like, "I want to marry a virgin, have a couple of children, make enough money to live a comfortable life, and be healthy." These expectations can serve as springboards to discussion about the general benefits of marriage: better health, more meaningful sex, more wealth, longer life span and children who are healthier and better adjusted.

Highlight the key benefits of marriage⁷⁴ (see Part I of this module for a fuller discussion). Discuss them from an angle that reflects teens' own perceptions and desires. The paragraphs below suggest some approaches that work with teens.

Teens want sexual issues to be discussed openly. Let them know that *married couples enjoy greater sexual fulfillment than their unmarried counterparts*. Many young people assume that single people enjoy exciting and frequent sex. Yet the research shows that married couples report more sexual fulfillment than singles. "According to a large-scale national study, married people have both more and better sex than do their unmarried counterparts. Not only do they have sex more often but they enjoy it more, both physically and emotionally."⁷⁵ Share the research and let them react to it.

Realize that many teens do not think that being sexually active prior to marriage has any consequences—now or later. Yet their expectations for marriage don't match this. For example, in my discussions with teen boys, most of them say they want to marry a virgin. Girls seem shocked to hear this. Have them discuss the phrase that "girls play at

⁷³ National Healthy Marriage Resource Center Website: http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/indiv_couple/whatishealthym.cfm

⁷⁴ Popenoe, David and Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, "Ten Important Research Findings on Marriage and Choosing a Marriage Partner—Helpful Facts for Young Adults," The National Marriage Project, November 2004.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

sex to get love and guys play at love to get sex.” Point out the fact that males and females think differently about sex.

Money is another priority for teens—most say they want to be wealthy. Studies show that *married couples make more money*. Get teens’ attention by pointing out that marriage brings with it the potential for higher earnings. Married couples tend to make more than single people and they accumulate greater wealth over time. “Marriage itself is a ‘wealth-generating institution,’” write Whitehead and Popenoe. “Those who marry ‘till death do us part’ end up, on average, four times richer than those who never marry. This is partly because marriage provides economies of scale—two can live more cheaply than one—and because the kind of people who make more money—those who work hard, plan for the future and have good interpersonal skills—are more likely to marry and stay married.”⁷⁶

Connect the dots for teens: having babies out of wedlock can derail their plans to be financially successful. According to research conducted by the Heritage Foundation, children of mothers who never marry (meaning that the father neither married nor lived with the mother or their children) have the highest level of child poverty (67 percent). Children whose parents are separated report the next highest poverty level (41 percent), closely followed by children whose parents cohabit but never marry (39 percent). The level of poverty among children of divorced parents who remain single is high as well (31 percent). Poverty rates drop significantly for children raised in stepfamilies (13 percent). However, the lowest level of child poverty (12 percent) occurs among children who live with their married, biological parents.⁷⁷

Interestingly, when researchers ask young people what qualities they want in a spouse, they say lifelong commitment, good communication, fidelity, close friendship, and sexual satisfaction. Financial security consistently ranks at the bottom of the list.⁷⁸ However, in reality many couples report finances as the number one source of conflict in marriage. Yet, few teens fully appreciate the costs involved in running a household and raising children,

so educators should consider incorporating financial management tips into the curriculum.

Teach Appropriate Expectations for Marriage

Besides focusing on the benefits of marriage, abstinence education programs must help teens set realistic expectations for marriage since many of them have unrealistic expectations on both ends of the spectrum. Some believe that a “soul mate” will yield a perfect relationship, requiring little or no work. They think there will be no fighting, no disagreements, no temptations against fidelity, and that they will always have much in common. Anyone who has been married for awhile knows this is unrealistic.

On the other hand, some teens think it is impossible to make a marriage work. Many children of divorce tend to be hesitant about marriage, not because they don’t want to get married, but because they have already experienced the pain of divorce and don’t want to go through it again. Teens whose parents divorced are often afraid to risk making a commitment because they haven’t experienced a loving relationship that lasts. They doubt their ability to make it work—which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have seen healthy, loving relationships fall apart because fear of failure led one person to sabotage the relationship.

Teach Essential Relationship Skills

Every abstinence education program should teach specific skills that will help teens prepare for marriage—such as relationship building, effective communication, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and money management. These essential skills can help build strong marriages and rescue shaky ones. Teens need to develop these relationship skills now to prepare for successful future marriages.

Relationship Building

“What does it mean to be in love? How will I know if I am in love?” When teens ask parents these questions, the typical answer is something like “You’ll just know.” However, teens need more guidance to discern appropriate and healthy levels of intimacy.

Address topics such as infatuation—that exciting rush of strong, fun and wonderful feelings for someone else. Help teens understand that time is the only good “love test” for these feelings. New relationships are so exciting in themselves that infatuation prevents a couple from “seeing

⁷⁶ The Economist, “Marriage in America: The Frayed Knot,” May 2007. http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9218127.

⁷⁷ Fagan, Patrick and Johnson, Kirk, “Map of America’s Family Culture,” The Heritage Foundation, September 2003.

⁷⁸ Harris Interactive, Hamilton County Research, 2005.

clearly” for the first 3-6 months.⁷⁹ Let them know that when people fall in love, they easily project on the other person a false image—one with few faults but with precisely the qualities the other person finds most attractive. To really know the other person, a teen must spend time getting to know them—enough time for the gloss to wear thin and the real person to shine through the imagined perfections.

Relationship building can be complicated by the fact that some teens have no real definition of love. We can teach them about different kinds of love, carefully defining the qualities of real, genuine love—and how to spot its imitation. Teens who have experienced unconditional love in their families will have an easier time discerning true love from its counterfeits. Those who have internalized a view that love is conditional, based on behavior and meeting certain standards, may have a more difficult time recognizing authentic love.

Relationship building skills are critical in abstinence education programs since teens need to understand the importance of healthy friendships and the intrinsic human need for relationships. They need to know how to “connect” in healthy ways with friends. Several different curricula provide excellent tools for “relationship discernment,” that is, helping define love and providing a compass as young people move forward in relationships.⁸⁰

Effective Communication

Discuss the different ways people communicate: both verbal and non-verbal. Encourage teens to consider how their families communicate. It is important for them to understand that the way they process information and communicate has a great deal to do with how they were raised. Everyone has filters through which they process information and interpret their own actions and those of others. Creative exercises, such as having teens practice communicating with the opposite sex about different topics, can provide an opportunity for them to evaluate the effectiveness of their communication skills. Also, they need to understand the impact of non-verbal communication, meaning body language, including facial expressions.

Listening to another person is a learned skill, not something that we automatically know how to do. Many curricula have

excellent information about communication. For example, one curriculum delves into the *five levels of intimacy* in communication, moving from superficial to meaningful. The more a couple communicates on the fourth and fifth levels (the most meaningful ones), the more satisfying their marriage.⁸¹ The reality is that most couples never go past level three because they feel it is too risky.

On the first level, the couple speaks in clichés: “How did your day go?” or “How are you?” On the second level, the couple shares safe information, such as “It looks like rain today,” or “Did you hear the neighbors sold their house?” These types of comments and questions demonstrate a superficial level of communication. On the third level, the couple states opinions: this type of communication is a bit more risky because it involves personal thoughts. Most couples make it to this level, but rarely go beyond it. For example, a couple with different political views and conflicting opinions about social issues might never broach those topics. On the fourth level, the couple is confident enough to share feelings. A wife who feels insecure about her husband’s friendship with someone of the opposite sex, but who shares a fourth level of intimacy, will express these feelings to her husband. Or a husband might share with his wife that he feels inadequate as a provider for the family. On the fifth level, the couple reveals needs to each other. This could involve sharing needs concerning intimacy, a career, dealing with in-laws or acknowledging an addiction.

The bottom line is that teaching teens realistic expectations for marriage and providing the tools to be effective communicators will help them with their relationships now and in the future.

Critical Thinking

In addition, teens need to learn to be critical thinkers so they can analyze what they hear and read from various sources, especially about sex, dating, and marriage. For example, some teens will tell you that they think living together is a great way to “test drive” the relationship and that having several sexual partners will not impact a future marital relationship. The vast majority will tell you that their information comes from the media, friends and, in some instances, their parents. But they often fail to question the sources and data behind what they have been told.

⁷⁹ Van Epp, J., *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, McGraw-Hill: 2006.

⁸⁰ *Connections: Relationship and Marriage, Love U2 Relationship Smarts, WAIT Training* and *Why kNOw* all do an excellent job of defining the different types of love giving teens a compass to use as they move forward in relationships.

⁸¹ Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M. and Blumberg, S.L., *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program: Fighting For Your Marriage*, PREP Educational Products, Inc., 1997.

When teens state information as if it were fact, ask them to cite their source and how they determined whether or not the information is accurate. Use current news items to help teach them to think critically about what they are hearing. For example, a recent news story reported that for the first time in our country's history more women are single than married. Is this statement accurate? In order for the reporter to get the number he was looking for (51 percent), he included the following as "single" women: never-married teenage girls age 15-19, most of whom were still living with their parents; 2 million married women whose husbands were either deployed with the military or incarcerated; and older widowed women. Knowing this information, the results are not a surprise. The reporter intentionally skewed the data to draw attention to his article. And he succeeded.

Conflict Resolution

Teens should examine their current patterns of handling conflict, including discussing the source of those patterns and their effectiveness. Again, some excellent curricula teach methods of conflict resolution. In one curriculum, each student performs a self-examination to learn healthy ways to handle conflict.⁸² Engage teens in discussions about the conflicts they encounter in their own homes and how they deal with them. Provide specific examples of conflicts and ways they can be resolved, along with the opportunity for discussion. Encourage them to be critical thinkers and make observations about the effectiveness of methods used to resolve the conflicts under discussion. Help them understand that conflict resolution is a skill that will help them in all their relationships—with family, friends, co-workers, and spouses. Heighten their motivation by sharing the research that conflict resolution skills are often a determining factor in whether a marriage survives.⁸³

Money Management

Money is often a major issue in marriages. While it may not be the "deal maker" in a marriage, research shows that it is often the "deal breaker." The sooner teens learn how to manage money the better. They need to learn how to budget, pay bills, and save money. Skills such as self-control, delayed gratification, and an orientation to the future come into play here as well.

⁸² Kamper, Charlene R., *Connections: Relationship and Marriage*, The Dibble Fund for Marriage Education, 2003.

⁸³ Markman, H. J., Stanley, S.M. and Blumberg, S.L., *Fighting for Your Marriage*, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Behavior Recognition

Because of the dramatic increase in dating violence among teens in the past few years,⁸⁴ information about violence in relationships must be included in abstinence education programs. Young women, in particular, need to recognize controlling behavior—such as boyfriends who want to know where their girlfriends are every minute, who determine what they can and can't wear, or who physically punish them. Teens need to realize that love never acts this way. Controlling behavior such as this is often a precursor to violence and is unhealthy. However, dating violence is not limited to males attacking females; it goes both ways. Either way, it often begins with verbal abuse. For example, a common word males use for "honey" or "sweetheart" is "b**ch." Thousands of young men have admitted that if they can get away with using this word as a "term of endearment," they know that the young woman has little self-respect and they can do whatever they want with her.⁸⁵ A national survey found that 1 in 11 high-school students said they had been hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year. One in 11 students also reported they had been forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.⁸⁶ Ninety-six percent of teens report emotional and psychological abuse in their dating relationships, numbers far greater than in the past.⁸⁷

To combat the rise in dating violence, one abstinence organization in Tennessee publishes *Is it Love?*, which defines characteristics of an unhealthy relationship including jealousy, possessiveness and controlling behavior, verbal criticism, social isolation, violent behavior and broken promises. It also provides stages of healthy relationship development including attraction, casual friendship, close friendship, intimacy and mature love. Additionally, it discusses the importance of qualities such as mutual respect, trust, honesty, support, fairness and equality, separate identities, and good communication.

⁸⁴ Murray, Jill (psychologist and author of *But I Love Him: Protecting your Teen Daughter from Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships*), personal interview, September 2002.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance-US 1999, CDC Surveillance Summaries June 9, 2000, MMWR 2000;49 (No.55-5): 8.

⁸⁷ Jezl, D.R., Molidor, C.E. and Wright, T.L., 1996, Physical, Sexual and Psychological in High School Dating Relationships: Prevalence Rates and Self-Esteem Issues; *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13 (1): 69-87.

In summary, discussions that parents have with their teenagers about sex should be ongoing and include the characteristics of healthy (and unhealthy) relationships; these same discussions should be prominent in your curriculum. Look at each component of your curriculum and determine how you can incorporate these issues so teens hear a consistent message.

Incorporate Marriage Content in the Message

It is important for abstinence education programs to incorporate marriage content. Include a consistent, thorough message to youth about the benefits of marriage coupled with skill-building training that empowers them to achieve the goal of a healthy, long-lasting marriage. I suggest incorporating the following topics: (1) appropriate boundaries, (2) self-discipline and self-control, (3) relationship building skills, (4) money management skills, and (5) the qualities of a healthy marriage (such as trust, respect, faithfulness, loyalty, responsibility, honesty, patience, commitment, and companionship). In addition, Marlene Pearson, author of *Making a Love Connection* and *Love U2*, has comprised the following list of what she believes needs to be part of a thorough relationship curriculum:

1. The emotional and social dimensions of sexuality;
2. Relationship experiences and relationship building;
3. Communication and conflict management skills;
4. New ways of addressing pregnancy prevention, the disconnect between marriage and childbearing, and the needs of a child; and
5. Marriage education that provides teens with social science evidence about why marriage is important to children, the benefits of marriage, findings on marital success and failure, and skills that improve marriage success.

The goal is to have the marriage message thoughtfully woven throughout the curriculum and program so every lesson demonstrates how abstinence ultimately relates to a successful marriage.

Include the Marriage Message

This section provides some concrete examples of ways to include the marriage message in abstinence education curricula: form partnerships, analyze media messages, role play, use research for discussion, and invite married couples to participate in the class.

Form Partnerships

Partnerships create synergy among organizations with different areas of expertise. One practical example is a grassroots community initiative dedicated to strengthening marriages and families that partnered with a Tennessee abstinence program aimed at students in 6th through 9th grades. The *marriage organization* taught healthy dating skills in some schools and wanted to expand its work to reach high-school students. It approached the *abstinence organization* with a collaboration plan. After the abstinence organization completed a week of abstinence education at a school, it would return to teach a week of the healthy dating relationship curriculum in partnership with the marriage organization. This collaboration worked because the marriage organization had the curriculum, but few school contacts, while the abstinence organization had strong relationships with many area schools, but no regular curriculum aimed at 9th grade and beyond. When the marriage organization trained the abstinence educators in the marriage curriculum, the abstinence organization benefited—they now had a curriculum to offer students through the 12th grade. The marriage organization accomplished its goal of teaching high-school students healthy dating skills with a focus on marriage. Working together was a win-win proposition for both of the organizations, the students, and the schools.

Another synergistic collaboration involves a marriage organization in Florida and an abstinence group in Colorado that partnered to teach abstinence and marriage education in the schools. One creative lesson on sex and dating, for example, uses a roll of toilet paper (yes, toilet paper) to get its message across. In the lesson, students imagine that each square of toilet paper represents a segment of their lives—the year they were born, when they started crawling, when they took their first step, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, getting a driver's license, high school graduation, college, employment and then marriage. Once they get to the marriage square, the facilitator says, "We are just asking you to wait from here (middle school) to here (marriage) to have sex." The remaining roll symbolizes the rest of their life. This lesson teaches teens that the decision to abstain is temporary but yields a greater good that lasts a lifetime.

Analyze Media Messages

One marriage organization in Tennessee analyzes media messages by encouraging families to play a game called "Catch the Lie." Using popular sitcoms, parents watch

shows with their teens and discuss the inaccuracies about relationships. It is an easy way to engage teens in discussions. For example, teens define healthy and unhealthy behavior in relationships, and discuss the consequences of these behaviors and the benefits of healthy relationships and marriage. Instructors can use this approach in the classroom to incorporate research findings on the benefits of marriage.

Along the same lines, one relationship skills curriculum, *Love U2*, incorporates a popular sitcom geared towards adolescents as a way to engage young people in dialogue throughout the course. Another curriculum, *The Art of Loving Well*, helps adolescents learn responsible sexual and social values through good literature, which reveals the complexities of life and relationships.

Role Play

Role plays are an excellent way to help teens reflect on some of these topics. To practice communication skills, have them work in pairs where one person acts as the speaker and the other acts as the listener. The speaker has an important piece of information he needs to communicate to the listener. However, the listener's job is to *avoid* listening to the speaker. Allow them to play their roles long enough for the speaker to get frustrated; let the students switch roles and repeat the activity. Initially, they tend

to laugh and think it is funny, but at some point they get frustrated. This shows teens the importance of listening. They learn to focus on what the other person is saying instead of what their response is going to be.

Use Research Findings as Discussion Topics

Another activity uses Drs. Popenoe and Dafoe Whitehead's brochure *Ten Things Teens Should Know About Marriage* and Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher's five myths of marriage, both referenced earlier, as springboards for teens' ideas (and possibly myths) about marriage. (You may want to get on the Internet and see what teens are saying about marriage before you do this exercise.) Instead of giving the students the information at the beginning of class, ask them what they think is true about marriage. Ask them where they got their information. After some discussion, share the research and facilitate dialogue about their initial ideas contrasted with the research findings. For many teens who think they "know it all" this can be an eye-opening experience.

Also consider providing healthy dating tips and ideas for creative dating. Listed below are concrete ideas for fun dates. Consider having students, either as homework or an in-class assignment, work in small groups and compile a list of as many creative and inexpensive dating ideas as they

CREATIVE DATING IDEAS

Why go to dinner and another movie? There are plenty of fun things to do on a date and best of all some cost little or nothing!

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Hike in the foothills/mountains | 11. Take your kid brother or sister out for ice cream | 19. Wash your parents' cars |
| 2. Check out funny films from the library | 12. Take pictures and create an on-line album together | 20. Play board games or cards |
| 3. Help out in a service organization together | 13. Plant a garden; take care of it together; enjoy the harvest | 21. Learn to play a sport together |
| 4. Go out for a soda and talk | 14. Look at old family picture albums | 22. Read a book together |
| 5. Go for a walk or jog | 15. Take your dog for a walk | 23. Bury a treasure (like a big Hershey's kiss) and make the other person treasure hunt to find it |
| 6. Cook a meal together for one of your families | 16. Get all dressed up and have a candlelight dinner in your family room | 24. Throw the other person a surprise party for a special occasion |
| 7. Go to a park, swing, and play | 17. Go to an historic site | 25. Record an audio tape together |
| 8. Watch people in the mall | 18. Philosophize under the stars. Share your hopes and dreams | 26. Record a video tape together |
| 9. Go for a drive and explore new places | | |
| 10. Run errands for your parents | | |

DATING GUIDELINES FOR TEENS

- Talk with your parents before you begin dating.
- Out of respect for your parents and yourself you should always let them know where you are going, a phone number where you can be reached, who you are going out with, what you will be doing and when you will return.
- Make it a point to be home by curfew.
- Make sure your date does not get home late.
- If you run into trouble and you are going to be late, call and let both sets of parents know.
- Respect your date.
- If you are a guy, go to the door to pick up your date and make it a point to meet her family.
- Avoid risky situations where things might happen that you will regret later.
- If you are a girl, make sure you have an emergency plan in place in case your date becomes forceful or violent. The “It won’t happen to me,” plan is not good enough.
- Consider group dating—the whole point of dating is learning how to develop growing friendships—not about getting sexually involved.
- Don’t mistake raging hormones for love. They are two entirely different things.
- What messages do the clothes you are or are not wearing send to your date? Seductive is out; modesty is in.
- Don’t date anyone significantly older or younger than yourself. A sixteen-year-old should not be dating a fourteen-year-old. A nineteen-year-old should not be dating a sixteen year old.

can. Over time, you will accumulate an amazing list to share with teens and this assignment encourages them to think creatively.

For classroom discussion, ask students to list healthy dating tips they would pass on to a younger sibling or a good friend. I think it is fun to see what they come up with. Often this is an encouraging exercise for them because there are usually some excellent tips on the list as well as ones that provide an opportunity to discuss healthy versus unhealthy dating ideas. Examples you can use include those in the list above.

Invite Married Couples to Participate in the Class

One way to address healthy expectations for marriage is to invite couples to class to discuss the realities of marriage. Ask couples you know to visit your abstinence education class and participate in a panel discussion. Look for a variety of couples—a young, newlywed couple in their early-mid twenties can share what they thought marriage was going to be like and how it actually is; an older couple, married for a number of years, can discuss how they have made it work; and a couple preparing for marriage can discuss what factors they considered in choosing their fiancé. Obviously, you want to carefully choose couples who are willing to be open and honest about their relationship. It is also helpful if some of the couples come from homes of divorce or are in a second marriage.

Start by asking the couples the following types of questions:

1. Did you live together before you married—how did that help or hurt your relationship?
2. What have you learned about each other since you married?
3. What do you think are the most important qualities in a marriage?
4. Do you believe opposites attract? How has that played out in your marriage?
5. How do you handle money issues?

After you ask some questions, let the students ask questions. This activity is usually a great catalyst for discussion about the realities of marriage.

Get the Marriage Message Out to the Masses

Merely teaching abstinence and healthy dating skills in the classroom is not enough to have a lasting effect in the minds and hearts of teens. If we want them to hear a consistent message about marriage and internalize the message, we must use a multifaceted approach. Parents, places of worship, schools, mentors, and the community-at-large have a responsibility to show and explain how teens can aspire to have healthy, long-lasting marriages. The following are suggested ways to take the abstinence and marriage message beyond the classroom.

Engage Parents

In order to be effective, programs need to reach out to both teens and their parents, providing the tools they need to discuss sex *and* marriage. Research shows that more than 90 percent of parents say the reason they avoid discussing sex and healthy dating with their teens is because they don't know what to say, how to say it or when to start talking about it.⁸⁸ Some parents are so frightened that their teen will ask a question they don't want to answer or that they can't answer; they just prefer not to have the conversation at all. For many parents it is embarrassing, difficult, and awkward.⁸⁹

Be intentional about connecting with parents in creative ways. Parents, like teens, can be difficult to reach, and creativity is important. Handouts, parent meetings in conjunction with Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) meetings, special speakers, books such as *Questions Kids Ask About Sex: Honest Answers for Every Age*, articles in local magazines and newspapers, PTSA newsletters, and websites, such as www.4parents.gov, and those specifically dedicated to teen healthy dating, are all effective ways to communicate with parents of adolescents. Provide parents with recommended reading lists. In the process of helping parents communicate with their children, their own marriage relationship often becomes stronger. Keep in mind that one size does not fit all: the best way to reach a number of people is to communicate the message by providing a variety of sources.

Publish Ads and Articles and Hold Press Conferences

Research shows that people need to hear or see a message a minimum of 7-10 times before they remember it. So consider a variety of vehicles for getting the messages of abstinence until marriage and healthy relationship skills out to the masses. Billboards, public service announcements, and articles published in local publications are all great techniques that many programs employ. In addition, Valentine's Day in February, *Let's Talk Month* in October, and *Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month* in May are excellent opportunities to hold press conferences in your community or to build a campaign (discussed below) around the abstinence until marriage message. Do

everything you can to consistently keep the message in front of both teens and their parents.

Publish Press Releases

Press releases are another great way to get your message out to the masses. Since most press agencies won't cover the same story twice, give them several different angles on the same story. For example, for *Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month* in May, a creative way to start a press release is by preparing a quiz with true or false questions that highlights the information you want to convey. Include county statistics for teen pregnancy, use quotes from an interview with a teen's parent, and provide some tips on how to discuss sex with teens.

After you send the press release, follow it up with a phone call. Direct the press agency to excellent websites with easy-to-access information about the topic. The more helpful you are, the more likely the press agency will call you in the future.

In addition to trying to get national monthly events covered by the media, watch for opportunities to be the "expert" regarding abstinence and healthy marriage. When you see an article in your local paper or on the news about abstinence or healthy marriage, offer to conduct an interview or give the local perspective on the story. The most important thing to remember when you are working with the media is to be creative and use a fresh approach.

Use Campaigns to Collaborate with Other Organizations

The best way to have broad reach in your community is to collaborate with other organizations doing similar work. For example, for *Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month* in May, a scout troop, an abstinence organization and a marriage group teamed up in Chattanooga, Tennessee to produce a campaign. Each organization provided its expertise and contributed financially. Collectively, they held a press conference. Each organization also wrote an article in its newsletter about the campaign. Because these entities reach different audiences, working collaboratively allowed all three groups to reach more people. The campaign you design can also include conducting speaking engagements, which might include a proclamation from the mayor and/or governor, creating a simple website with information about abstinence and healthy dating skills, placing ads on billboards, and creating bus placards.

⁸⁸ Albert, Bill, *With One Voice: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

In addition, a marriage group in Florida is partnering with a public middle school in Florida that has the highest teen out-of-wedlock pregnancy and STI rates in the county. The marriage group teaches an abstinence program that includes relationship skills to all 7th and 8th graders.

Host Special Events, Seminars and Other Activities

Consider holding special events that reinforce what teens are learning in the classroom. Several are discussed below.

The “Great Sex Bus Tour”

One example of such an event was the *Great Sex Bus Tour* in Colorado. An executive director and a lead national trainer for an abstinence program traveled to several cities in the state with a bus full of teens. The teens on the bus provided support to teens in each of the cities for their abstinence decision. Those on the bus met with receptive community groups and were able to mobilize their communities and encourage teens to abstain from drugs, alcohol, sex and other high-risk behaviors while teaching the secrets of living well, loving well and marrying well—all using a skills-based approach. The range of attendees was broad and included parents, teachers, community leaders, youth-serving agency personnel, school administrators, faith leaders, and medical professionals.

What to Do Until You Say ‘I Do’

What to Do Until You Say ‘I Do’ is a seminar sponsored by an abstinence group in Tennessee for mothers and daughters. It is held on a Friday night and the following Saturday morning. On Friday evening, mothers learn the importance of talking to their daughters about abstinence and healthy dating relationship skills. The Saturday half-day session for daughters focuses on helping them abstain in a culture that sends contrary messages. The session runs from 9:00 a.m. until noon and is fast paced. Girls age 12 and older learn about strategies and tools to help them remain abstinent until marriage. They also learn how and where to buy modest clothes and are told how boys and girls think about sex differently. Consider having large group presentations along with concurrent breakout sessions on topics such as dating etiquette, fashion and makeup, and the male perspective on love and relationships.

This seminar was a collaborative effort among an abstinence organization, a marriage group, a number of local churches, and a Girl Scout troop. The groups found a benefactor to underwrite the cost of the event so the

girls only had to pay \$5.00 to attend. One of the daughters who attended sent the following email message to her mother: *Mom-this was the best seminar you ever made me go to. Thanks!* Consider hosting events that are designed specifically for either boys or girls. Teens take in information better when they are not distracted by the presence of the opposite sex.

Pressures of the Adolescent Culture—Empowering Healthy Adolescents: The Next Generation

Pressures of the Adolescent Culture—Empowering Healthy Adolescents: The Next Generation was a collaborative effort among an abstinence organization, a community foundation, a bank, a marriage group and a health department. During this event, the primary speaker addressed the current adolescent culture and provided parents and professionals who work with teens the tools needed to discuss tough issues with their children. Additionally, the speaker met with more than 600 teens during two youth rallies. He provided a message of hope and explained specific things teens can do to constructively deal with cultural pressures.

Family Wellness: Survival Skills for Healthy Families

Several curricula are geared toward building family relationships rather than focusing on either parents or youth. These curricula help family members improve communication so they can relate to each other and get along better. One possible community event could be to provide training on a family curriculum to professionals in the area. The list of professionals could include clergy, school guidance counselors, social workers, teachers, employee assistance workers, therapists and others. I like this approach because it includes the entire family. Instead of separating the children and parents, this approach uses role plays, interactive games, coaching and a variety of other activities to engage the entire family. These curricula cover important topics such as parents as leaders, the role of children, decision making, problem solving, appropriate expectations, values and sexual activity, drugs and alcohol and more. For parents who are uncomfortable discussing sexual topics with their children, these curricula teach them how to have these types of conversations and much more.

Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month Billboard Contest

Doing the same activities year after year can be ineffective, so change them to add variety. One effective activity involved a partnership among an abstinence organization, a marriage organization, and a Girl Scout troop. They held a

billboard art contest among middle and high-school students in April, the month before *Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month*. Students submitted artwork portraying a positive message about why teens should save sex for marriage. Within one month, the organizations received almost 400 pieces of artwork. A judging panel determined first, second and third place winners and a special ceremony was held for the students, their parents, and their teachers to announce the winners and present prizes. (Winners received \$500, \$250, and \$150 prizes, respectively.) The school with the highest participation percentage won \$500. Billboards and bus placards around town displayed the first place winner's artwork during the month of May. In addition, press coverage during the contest and through the month of May increased dramatically. News media particularly like to cover events involving young people.

High Adventure

Another option is to use high adventure (such as a ropes course) or other extreme sports to reinforce some of the relationship skills taught in the classroom—problem solving, communication, conflict resolution, working as a team, self-discipline, and delayed gratification. Teaching teens these skills and then taking youth to a ropes course where they participate in activities requiring them to use these skills offers the opportunity not only for them to practice the skills but also for adults to coach them in the process. Often a teen will say, "I can do it myself." While a healthy sense of individualism is good, we need to foster a team spirit among youth. A ropes course instructor might ask questions such as, "Would you like the others in the group to give you some suggestions to help you accomplish the task?" or "Is there anything we can do to help you?" Additionally, teens encouraging each other, helping the weakest conquer discouragement, can have a profound

effect. Believing that they can complete this difficult task lends itself to a discussion about the significance of surrounding yourself with people who believe in you and encourage healthy behaviors.

I have seen teens break down in tears after an experience like this because it was the first time they actually succeeded at something difficult or it was the first time they experienced real encouragement from others. This is a powerful way to internalize the skills we are trying to teach. Even macho teens find the ropes course a real challenge and a transformational experience.

Summary

Connecting abstinence and marriage may at first seem like a daunting task; yet it is crucial. My hope is that this training guide has not only convinced you of its importance but also given you the resources to accomplish this goal. We all want to teach young people the skills they need to help them succeed in life. A college professor once told me that many adolescents enter college without any positive role models for healthy relationships—all the more reason for us to teach healthy relationship skills by example and in our programs. We may be the only ones who take the time to do so—and teens' lives will be richer as a result of our investment in them. Start thinking now about how you will incorporate marriage and healthy relationship skills into your abstinence curriculum and program. Many people are available to assist and coach you in your efforts.

Remember, young people want to get married and they want to have successful, healthy, lasting marriages. What better gift can we give them than to help provide them with the tools necessary to make their dreams a happy reality?

APPENDIX A: Bibliography

- Albert, B. (2007). *With One Voice: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- Amato, P. (1996). "Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(3).
- Anderson, K.M. (June 2002). "Marriage From a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do About It?" *Research Brief*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2000). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*. CDC Surveillance Summaries June 9, 2000.
- Cohan, C., & Kleinbaum, S. (2002). "Toward a Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Pre-marital Cohabitation and Marital Communication." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 180-192.
- Epp, J.V. (2006). *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Fagan, P., & Johnson, K. (2003). *The Map of America's Family Culture*. The Heritage Foundation.
- First Things First. (1999). *Hamilton County Marriage Report*. Chattanooga: First Things First.
- Glenn, N.D. (2005). *With This Ring: A National Survey on Marriage in America*. Washington, DC: National Fatherhood Initiative.
- Glenn, N., & Marquardt, E. (2001). *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- Goldstein, J., & Kenney, C. (2001). "Marriage Delayed or Marriage Forgone? New Cohort Forecasts for First Marriage for U.S. Women." *American Sociological Review*, 506-519.
- Hamilton County Marriage Report*. (2005) Harris Interactive.
- Hymowitz, K.S. (2006). *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in Post-Marital Age*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Institute for American Values. (2003). *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- Institute for American Values. (2002). *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- Jezi, D., Molidor, C., & Wright, T. (1996). "Physical, Sexual, and Psychological Abuse in High School Dating Relationships: Prevalence Rates and Self-Esteem Issues." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13(1), 69-87.
- Markman, H., Floyd, F., Stanley, S., & Storaasli, R. (1988). "Prevention of Marital Distress, a Longitudinal Investigation." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 210-217.
- Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. (2001). *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. (1997). *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program: Fighting For Your Marriage*. PREP Educational Products.
- "Marriage in America – The Frayed Knot" (May 2007). *The Economist*.
- McLanahan, S., & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McLanahan, S., Donahue, E., & Haskins, R. "Introducing the Issue," *The Future of Children – Marriage and Child Wellbeing*, 15(2) (2005): 3-12.
- "Most Teens See Marriage and Kids in Their Future." *Youthviews: The Newsletter of the Gallup Youth Survey*, 8(10) 2001.
- Nock, S.L., "A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships," *Journal of Family Issues*, (1995): 53-76.
- Popenoe, D., & Whitehead, B.D. (2006). *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America*. Piscataway: National Marriage Project Rutgers University.
- Siegel, J.P. (2000). *What Children Learn From Their Parents' Marriage: It May Be Your Marriage, but It's Your Child's Blueprint for Intimacy*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Sorokin, P. (1947). *Society, Culture, and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Stanley, S. (2006). *Skating to Where the Puck is Going to Be* presentation. Smart Marriages Conference. Atlanta, Georgia
- Stanley, S. (2006). *Sliding versus Deciding* presentation. Smart Marriages Conference. Atlanta, Georgia
- Stanton, G.T. *Focus on Social Issues*. Retrieved May 9, 2007, from Citizen Link: www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/marriage/A000000982.cfm
- (2001). "Teen Relationship: Teens Talk on Parents, Marriage, and Sex," *Families Northwest*. Washington.
- Teen Survey*. (2007) Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.
- The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles*. New York: The Institute for American Values, 2000.
- Waite, L.J. (1995). "Does Marriage Matter?" *Demography*, 483-507.
- Waite, L.J., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*. New York: Doubleday.
- Waite, L.J., & Joyner, K. (2001). "Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?" *Sex, Love, and Health in America*, 239-269.
- Wallerstein, J. (2000). *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: 25 Years of Research*. New York: Hyperion.
- Whitehead, B.D. (2006). A Message to Our Daughters. Smart Marriages Conference. Atlanta, Georgia
- Whitehead, B.D., & Pearson, M., *Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy and Marriage*. Washington DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- Youth Poll*. New American Media. (2007)

APPENDIX B: Suggested Reading

The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, Doubleday

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce, Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, Hyperion

Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age, Kay Hymowitz and Ivan R. Dee

Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce, Elizabeth Marquardt, Crown Publishers

Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities – Institute for American Values

Hooking Up and Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right – Institute for American Values

Whitehead, B. & Pearson, M. (2006). *Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy, and Marriage*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The State of Our Unions: 2000-2006 – The National Marriage Project – Rutgers University

Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage – The National Marriage Project – Rutgers University

How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk, John Van Epp, McGraw-Hill

Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-one Reasons Why Marriage Matters – Institute for American Values

The Future of Children: Marriage and Child Wellbeing – The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution

For additional resources, perform a web search using key words.

APPENDIX C: How to Incorporate “Marriage” into Abstinence Programs

1. Teach youth the benefits of marriage for adults, children and society.		
ADULTS benefit from marriage in the following ways, among others:	CHILDREN benefit from being raised in a household with their married, biological parents in several ways, including the following:	SOCIETY benefits when its members have strong marriages:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married couples enjoy better physical and emotional health, meaning they tend to live longer, than single people. • Married couples enjoy greater sexual fulfillment than do their unmarried counterparts. • Married couples tend to have well-adjusted children. • Being married provides couples with the essential connections for healthy relationships—someone to trust and to listen, and someone who cares deeply about them. • In general, married couples are better off financially, which results in greater accumulated wealth over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children of married couples enjoy greater academic success, meaning higher test scores and grade-point averages, miss fewer days of school, and have greater expectations to attend college than those who live with one parent. • Children of married couples are more successful over time partly because they are more likely to graduate from college and get higher paying jobs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married couples enjoy better physical health than single people, keeping the healthcare costs down and requiring fewer social services. • Married couples enjoy better emotional health than single people. • Married couples have lower domestic violence rates than those who are single or cohabiting. • Married couples have lower crime rates. • Married couples experience less teen pregnancy. • Married couples experience lower rates of migration. • Since more married couples buy homes than single people, they experience higher property values.
2. Teach appropriate and realistic expectations for marriage.	3. Teach essential relationship skills.	4. Get the marriage message out to the masses—publish ads and press releases, write articles, hold press conferences, and host special events.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myth: “It’s impossible to make it work.” • Myth: “Marriage takes little or no work—there won’t be any disagreements, etc.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship building • Effective communication • Critical thinking • Conflict resolution • Money management • Behavior recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage parents • Involve schools • Collaborate with places of worship • Collaborate with mentors • Collaborate with the community at large

APPENDIX D: Evaluating Relationship Skills

Here are some examples of pre/post-test questions you might ask to determine what students know about relationship skills prior to teaching the course and once it is completed. There are other surveys that have been used by specific curricula. This was developed as a general way to determine pre and post what teens know about healthy relationships. Keep in mind that this was developed knowing that students don't like to take the time to answer long surveys.

Please mark the one that best describes your current relationship.

- Not dating and single
- Dating various people
- Dating exclusively (only one person)
- Recently broke up

Please mark your answers to the following questions based on what you think you would actually do.

Ashley is one of those girls who always has to have a boyfriend. Her friends are fed up and have been telling her that the *right* reason to date is:

- So she won't feel lonely on a Saturday night
- To help her feel more loved
- Because it is a great way to get to know someone
- That she is finally old enough

Michael and Deena met at a party on Friday night, and they were immediately attracted to each other. A good next step for them to take is to:

- Begin a sexual relationship to see if they are compatible
- Find out about their common interests
- Tell each other everything about how they think and feel to get close
- Spend all of their free time together

Erick and Michelle have disagreements like any couple, and the best way for Erick to handle these problems is to:

- Listen to Michelle even if he doesn't want to hear her side
- Remind Michelle about old arguments where he was right
- Continue the argument until he wins
- Give in so that Michelle won't be mad at him any more

Jarrett's girlfriend, Danielle, is devastated that he broke up with her. She thought he loved her, and the best thing she can do now is:

- Not give up; keep emailing and sending text messages to say how much she loves him
- Get revenge by telling the secrets he confided in her
- Spend time with friends
- Find a new boyfriend immediately to feel better and make Jarrett jealous

The last time Justin and Martha had a fight he pushed her against the wall and then slapped her when she wouldn't listen. Later he apologized and said that it would never happen again. Martha should do the following:

- Stay with him if he brings flowers with his apology
- Work harder at the relationship to make it better
- Break off the relationship
- Change the way she argues so he will not be as angry next time

Using the following scale as a guide, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement: strongly disagree (NO!), disagree (no), agree (yes), strongly agree (YES!)

Mark only one answer for each statement. Answer as honestly as you can.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think that I will be in a healthy marriage one day that will last my whole life.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
I know how to be a great listener in all of my relationships.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
I know what I am looking for in a dating relationship.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
I will take a marriage preparation course with my fiancé before I get married.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
If my future spouse and I have trouble in our marriage, we will go to counseling to help us get back on track.	NO!	no	yes	YES!

APPENDIX E: Cohabitation Myths

At *First Things First*, we published a brochure that discussed several myths and the actual facts. Here are five of the most common myths about cohabitation:

Myth 1: Sharing finances and expenses will make things easier on our relationship.

Fact: Just like any couple, disputes often center on money. Couples who live together have more financial issues to resolve. Conflicts arise over who is responsible for which bill and the rights one partner has to tell the other how to spend “his or her money.” Instead of thinking in terms of “we” when it comes to money, most cohabiters think along the lines of “yours” and “mine.”

Myth 2: Marriage is just a piece of paper, so cohabiting is really no different than being married.

Fact: Legally, marriage is paperwork. However, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, marriage is a contract of commitment. Living together typically does not bring the same benefits to the relationship that marriage does. In fact, cohabiting couples tend to resemble singles because they are often less committed to the relationship.⁹⁰ Viewing marriage as only a legal arrangement strips it of its meaning and sets the relationship up for failure. If couples do not view marriage as a loving, committed relationship, divorce is almost inevitable.

Myth 3: Your sex life ends when you get married.

Fact: According to a large-scale national study, married couples have both more and better sex than do their unmarried counterparts.⁹¹ Not only

do they have sex more often but they enjoy it more, both physically and emotionally. The level of sexual satisfaction is lower among couples who live together than for married couples. Also, couples who live together tend to be less faithful to their partners than married couples.

Myth 4: Cohabitation is the real deal; it's just like being married.

Fact: Many people enter a cohabiting relationship hoping it will lead to marriage soon; however, living together isn't always a stepping-stone to marriage. Researchers from the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University tracked cohabiting couples over a five to seven year period. They found that only 46 percent of cohabiting relationships are considered “precursors to marriage,” meaning those in which couples have definite plans to get married. The rest are trial marriages (15 percent), co-residential dating (29 percent), and substitutes for marriage (10 percent). After five to seven years, only 40 percent of all cohabiting couples had married, while 39 percent had separated and 21 percent still lived together.⁹²

Myth 5: Living together is best if there are children involved.

Fact: The effect of cohabitation on children is significant. Children in these situations are at risk of emotional and social difficulties, performing poorly in school, having early premarital sex and having difficulty forming permanent emotional attachments in adulthood. If the man in the household is not the biological father, the children are at greater risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse.

⁹⁰ Nock, Stephen L., “A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships” *Journal of Family Issues* 16-1 (1995): 53-76.

⁹¹ Waite, Linda J. and Joyner, Kara, “Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?” 239-269 in E.O. Laumann and R. T. Michael, eds., *Sex, Love, and Health in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); E.O. Laumann, J.H. Gagnon, R.T. Michael and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁹² Casper, Lynne M. and Bianchi, Suzanne M., “Continuity and Change in the American Family” (California: Sage Publications, 2002): 59.

APPENDIX F: Marriage Myths

In *The Case for Marriage*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher explore five myths about marriage:

Myth 1: Divorce is usually the best answer for kids when a marriage becomes unhappy.

Reality: The authors discovered that the vast majority of “bad marriages” that don’t end up in divorce eventually become good marriages. In a study of couples in “bad” marriages who chose to stay together, 86 percent reported five years later that their marriages had turned around and were now happier. In fact, 60 percent said their marriages had become “very happy.”

Additionally, only 30 percent of marriages that end in divorce are high-conflict marriages where children say they are thankful that the fighting has stopped. In the other 70 percent of divorces, the couple cites disconnectedness or not being in love anymore as the reason for the divorce. Ask almost any child who comes from a home of divorce what they want most in life and almost every time the answer will be “I want my parents to get back together.”

Myth 2: Marriage is primarily for the benefit of children.

Reality: Marriage has significant benefits for children in addition to adults. Marriage is an important social institution that delivers significant benefits in virtually every indicator science can measure.

Myth 3: Marriage is good for men, but bad for women.

Reality: A balanced look at the research shows that married men and women both report less anxiety and depression, higher self-esteem, more financial stability, and a much higher level of happiness. The research is compelling: people do better when they get married and stay married.

Myth 4: Promoting marriage puts women at risk for violence.

Reality: In fact, the opposite is true: marriage seems to protect women from domestic violence. Married people are less likely to be victims of interpersonal violence. In studies of domestic violence between partners, married people are substantially less likely than cohabiting people to say that arguments between them became violent (4 percent married, 13 percent cohabiting).

Myth 5: Marriage is a private affair of the heart two adults.

Reality: Marriage is a public, legally binding, religiously supported promise that two people will stay together and act as a team for their entire lives. “Marriage changes the way they see themselves, and it changes the way other people see them and treat them,” Waite says. “It also strengthens the bonds between children and their father’s side of the family.”

APPENDIX G: Relationship Myths

According to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of the National Marriage Project, five relationship myths pervasive among teens contribute greatly to failed relationships.⁹³

Myth: Teen sex will not impact having a healthy marriage down the road. Two-thirds of today's teens believe it is okay to have sex if you think you love the person.

Reality: The consequences of teen sex can last a lifetime while the relationship does not usually last that long.

Myth: It is okay to have kids before getting married because you can find a guy later.

Reality: Although girls hope they can find a guy later on, evidence shows that their chances of ever marrying decline.

Myth: People should cohabit before marriage.

Reality: Studies show that those who cohabit before marrying have less satisfying marriages and a much higher chance of eventually divorcing than those who do not.

Myth: There is nothing you can do to prepare for a healthy, successful marriage. There are many who believe having a lot of bad relationships is the only way to have a good one and heartbreak is unavoidable.

Reality: Learning healthy dating relationship skills can help prepare you for a healthy, successful marriage.

Myth: There is nothing you can do to change your chances of divorce. The mantra for today's young people is "Fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce." They believe that a successful marriage is a roll of the dice.

Reality: A successful marriage is not just luck. There are many things teens can do—and need to do or avoid doing—to improve their chances for a healthy marriage.

⁹³ Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, Keynote Address at Smart Marriages, Happy Families Conference 2006

APPENDIX H: Guide for Abstinence Educators on Authoritative Communities

Teens need the support of authoritative communities and abstinence educators can help. The *Hardwired to Connect* study provides important information for parents, community leaders, educators and others who work with children and adolescents. The home environment that we create for our children matters a great deal. Based on data from the research by the scholars of the study, they believe that building and strengthening authoritative communities (groups that live the connectedness that our children increasingly lack) is likely to be our society's best strategy for negotiating the current crisis of childhood disconnectedness and improving the lives of children and adolescents.⁹⁴

Authors of this report determined 10 characteristics of an authoritative community: (1) it is a social institution that includes children and youth; (2) it treats children as ends in themselves; (3) it is warm and nurturing; (4) it establishes clear limits and expectations; (5) the core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists; (6) it is multi-generational; (7) it has a long-term focus; (8) it reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person; (9) it encourages spiritual growth and religious development; and (10) it is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.⁹⁵

Sounds a lot like a family, doesn't it? In fact, the report states that the family is the first and probably the most important authoritative community. Authoritative communities don't just happen. Dedicated and committed people with a shared vision of building a good life for the next generation create and sustain these communities.

Hardwired to Connect, a study commissioned by the YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values, found that people are intrinsically relational and desire moral and spiritual meaning in their lives.⁹⁶ Individuals are hardwired for close attachments

to other people, beginning with their mothers, fathers, extended family, and eventually the community. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential for emotional health.

Everyone, including teens, not only wants these connections; they need them. In 2002, scholars at the National Research Council estimated that at least one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at risk of not achieving productive adulthood.⁹⁷ "More young people are suffering from mental illness, emotional distress, and behavioral problems...High levels of anxiety, or neuroticism, are not only problems in themselves, but are also associated with major depressions, suicide attempts, alcohol abuse, marital problems, and a wide variety of physical ailments."⁹⁸ At the heart of the problem is a lack of meaningful connections to other people, especially parents and other adult role models. Families in a hurry, marital distress, over-commitment and parenting from a distance all contribute to this unhealthy disconnectedness.⁹⁹

The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, which includes data on 90,118 American adolescents, found that those who feel connected to their parents (e.g., get feelings of warmth, love and caring from their parents) are less likely than those who do not feel connected to suffer from emotional distress, have suicidal thoughts and behaviors, be violent, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol and/or smoke marijuana. They also have their first sexual experiences later than adolescents who are not connected to their parents.¹⁰⁰

While parents are the first and best authoritative community, other authoritative communities can provide some of the same benefits when good parenting is not available. And that is where we, as abstinence educators, can help.

⁹⁷ Haggerty, R.J., "Child Health 2000: New Pediatrics in the Changing Environment of Children's Needs in the 21st Century," *Pediatrics* 96, 1995: 807.

⁹⁸ *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, Institute for American Values, 2003.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health 1997 <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>.

⁹⁴ *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, Institute for American Values 2003.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Baumgardner, MS, CFLE, is the Executive Director of First Things First, a one-of-a-kind grassroots organization dedicated to strengthening families in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The success of the First Things First initiative has sparked interest in duplicating the First Things First model in cities across the country. Ms. Baumgardner has worked in the fields of marketing and counseling for more than 20 years. Prior to joining First Things First, she was the marketing director at East Ridge Hospital and Valley Hospital, where she was also a social worker and program director for the child & adolescent program.

Ms. Baumgardner frequently speaks on family, parenting and marriage issues. Her weekly column on marriage and family issues in the *Chattanooga Times-Free Press* reaches thousands. In addition, she serves on the boards of a number of community and national organizations. She and her husband, Jay, have been married for 18 years and they have a 14-year-old daughter, Ashley.