

## Cohabitation

The National Marriage Project on the negative effects of cohabitation, co-authored by Rutgers University sociologist David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, challenges much of the conventional wisdom on the subject.

In an interview with David Boldt of the Philadelphia Inquirer, Popenoe points out that living together may do no harm if the two people involved are clearly intent on getting married, and if the male partner is “mature and honourable.” The problem is that these circumstances don’t always exist. Surveys show that women frequently imagine that the man they are living with has more serious intentions than he does.

Further, there is no evidence that living together before marriage improves the couple’s chances for a successful marriage. A growing amount of evidence suggests that living together can reduce their chances, probably by diminishing their respect for the institution of marriage. This is nothing new, but in the past a number of researchers (including Popenoe) have minimized it on the grounds that people who live together include a large percentage of unconventional, free-spirited types more likely to get divorced anyway which may skew the statistics.

This new report dismisses that interpretation. It can’t stand up to findings like the 1992 study in the Journal of Marriage & the Family of 3,300 married couples who had lived together “has a 46 percent greater hazard” of breaking up than those who had not. The report is certainly not “draconian” in its prescriptions. “Principles” suggested as a guideline include “consider not living together.” Others suggest reducing the duration and frequency of such living arrangements.

The only absolutist prescription is that couples should not cohabit if there are children involved. Cohabitors’ increased likelihood of breaking up (compared to married couples) hurts children in many ways. There is also a greater chance of child abuse in many ways. There is also a greater chance of child abuse in a household where the adults are living together rather than married, according to the report.

In fact, the most dangerous family structure for a small child is to be in a household where the child’s mother is living with a man other than its father. Survey data indicates that there is a 3,000 percent greater likelihood to batter a baby in the home than if the male present is the father’s biological father.

Boldt cites a conversation with his 27-year old son who lived with a woman until they broke up. His son pointed out that “...everyone in my generation is scared to death of getting divorced. They either come from a broken home, or know someone who did and know what the pain is like. Everyone says ‘I’m only going to get married once, and it’s going to be the perfect person.’ ”

The reality is, however, the important thing isn’t finding the perfect person, its being able to work things out.

Source

Boldt, David. “Dangers of Cohabiting Before Marriage.” Philadelphia Inquirer Commentary (Feb. 16, 1999):A11.