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## Kids could use a road map for lasting marriage

By SUSAN REIMER

Ask any of your friends to name one sociological statistic, and I bet this is the one you will get: 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. Our kids probably think the figure is higher. Many of them have friends whose parents are separated or divorced. Children must think divorce is contagious, like the flu. But it isn't true. Half of all marriages don't end in divorce. Only half of some marriages end in divorce.

There are ways to prevent divorce, and I am not talking about marriage counseling or sharing the chores or using "I" messages to diffuse arguments. If you get an education - and college improves your chances - wait until you are out of your teens to get married and wait until you are married to have a child, your chances of staying together shoot up.

But if you take any of these steps out of order or if you marry or have a child before the age of 21, your chances of getting married or remaining married plummet. And there is a good chance your child will grow up in poverty or near poverty, perform poorly in school, fail to achieve in this demanding economy, and repeat this sad story in his own life and the lives of his children.

There is one caveat: Cohabitation is not the same as marriage. Cohabitation is the same as having your emotional bags packed by the front door. Though there are often children born to cohabiting parents, the couples don't regularly marry.

Ask young people how they see their future, says Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, and they will tell you they want to get married. "But a lot of them don't think they are ever going to get there," he said.

In neighborhoods where single motherhood is the norm, there is no model for marriage. These young people might as well watch a Disney movie. But middle-class young people believe that marriage is such an iffy proposition that it is to be undertaken only with extreme caution. These are the ones who will end up cohabiting because they think it is a good first step, when it is actually no step at all.

"For generations, we had an overriding social script," said Albert. "Adolescence, education, marriage, then babies. In that order. "Now it is a la carte. You can choose any of those things in any order, and it doesn't matter. But, in fact, it does. It impacts your staying together, the welfare of your children and your personal happiness." Albert calls it the "success sequence." "There is no magic formula for a successful marriage," he said. "But those steps make things go so much better."

What motivates middle-class men and women to marry is something Kay Hymowitz calls "The Mission," the project of shaping their children into adults who will have the education and self-discipline to create their own middle-class life. And these couples instinctively know marriage radically increases their chances of doing that, writes Hymowitz in *Marriage and Caste in America* (Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

Educated women understand what social scientists are demonstrating: that two heads, two pairs of hands, two people to drive the carpool and help with homework - let alone two incomes - are necessary if their children are to get on the lacrosse team or the debate team, get the SAT scores, get into the fancy college, get the good job and get the house in the suburbs.

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Albert, who, in his capacity at the National Campaign, has tried to get parents to talk to their children about sex, also wants them to talk to their children about the "success sequence."  
"We tell kids in great detail from the time they are young about the importance of education and how to get where they want to go on the educational ladder and the job ladder. Do we give them the same sort of script for relationships and marriage? No. We don't give them a script at all."

Young people are almost universally saying that they aspire to marriage, but we are not telling them how to get there. We don't talk to them about commitment or relationships or the best ways to build a family and keep it together. "They are afraid of divorce, but we aren't telling them that the likelihood of divorce drops drastically if you do certain things," said Albert.  
"My generation turned family life on its head in the 1960s, when the birth control pill and feminism combined to deal a blow to the traditional nuclear family. That experiment is over. The results are in. Two married parents are best for children by almost any standard you want to name. "

We have to share that news with our children. And then we have to tell them - maybe even show them by our own example - how to get there.