



THE BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE

Bridget Maher

“Dear Papa ... As much as I have tried, I do not have a template to understand myself or this world, and, at times, the knowledge that I have spent all these years without knowing you overwhelms me. ... It is so basic, to want to feel loved. I have not felt that.” Lisa, a 28-year-old child of divorce who had not seen or spoken to her father in nineteen years, wrote these words a few months after attempting to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. As she lay in her hospital bed, she said, “I felt my father’s absence with a sharpness I hadn’t known before.”¹

Lisa is a casualty of the decline of the institution of marriage, as indicated by the following statistics:

- **Low marriage rate:** In 2002, the U.S. marriage rate was the lowest it has ever been, with only 43.4 marriages per thousand unmarried women in that year.²
- **Delayed marriage:** Men and women are marrying later. In 2003, the median age at first marriage was 26.9 for men, compared to 23.2 in 1970. For women, it was 25.3 in 2002 versus 20.8 in 1970.³
- **Divorce:** The divorce rate has almost doubled since 1960. Based on projections of current divorce rates, between 40 and 50 per-cent of marriages today are likely to end in divorce or separation.⁴
- **Cohabitation:** The number of cohabiting couples has increased dramatically during the past 30 years. In 2002, there were 4.9 million cohabiting couples, compared to just over half a million in 1970.⁵
- **Out-of-wedlock childbearing:** Today, one-third of all births are out of wedlock.⁶ The unwed birthrate is highest among women between the ages of 20 and 24.⁷

Lisa’s story reveals the emotional pain that children from broken homes experience. Not having married parents deprives children of the love, security,

and attention they need. Marriage provides the optimal environment for rearing children, the future of society. Children raised by their biological married parents receive numerous social, health, and economic benefits, and these gifts benefit the whole of society. Conversely, it is through the breakdown of marriage that children and society are harmed.

Marriage also benefits adults by allowing them to overcome feelings of loneliness and incompleteness by forming a complementary union. Also, it allows them to promise to give each other mutual care, respect, and protection and to raise a family together. But the primary reason marriage is a vital institution is that it serves public purposes, namely, procreation and the benefit of children and society.

Marriage Benefits Children

There is a wealth of evidence that children raised by their biological, married parents have the best chance of becoming happy, healthy, and morally upright citizens in the future.

Complementary Parental Roles: Marriage ensures that children have access to a mother and a father. Mothers and fathers have unique and complementary roles in children's development. For example, children's emotional bond with their mothers helps them develop their conscience, capacities for both intimacy and empathy, and a sense of self-worth.⁸ One study found that adults who perceived their mothers as available and devoted to them in childhood were less likely to suffer from depression and low self-esteem as adults and more likely to be resilient in dealing with life events.⁹

Involved fathers produce children who have better emotional health, do better academically, and attain higher job status as adults.¹⁰ Also, fathers teach their children empathy as well as assertiveness and independence.¹¹ But most importantly, fathers are role models for both their sons and daughters. Fathers teach their sons how to be a man, how to take on male responsibilities, and how to relate to women. Girls learn from their fathers that they are loveable; they also learn to appreciate their femininity and how to relate to men.¹²

Less Risky Behavior: Some of the most important benefits children receive from married parents are love and attention. This makes them less likely to engage in behaviors such as premarital sex, substance abuse, delinquency, and suicide. A Swedish study of almost a million children found that children raised by single parents are more than twice as likely as those raised in two-parent homes to suffer from a serious psychiatric disorder, to commit or attempt suicide, or to develop an alcohol addiction.¹³ A 2000 study of U.S. data found that adolescents

from single-parent families were more likely to have had sexual intercourse than those living with both parents.¹⁴

Template for Future Marriage: Children with married parents receive a model for their future marriage. Children living in intact homes learn that it is possible to entrust oneself to another person wholly for a lifetime. Also, they learn what marriage looks like. By their example, parents teach children about the sacrifices marriage entails and how husbands and wives should treat each other. Children learn from their parents that marriage is filled with many joys as well as sorrows, but that it's possible to work through hardships with charity, forgiveness, patience, and perseverance.

While their parents' relationship with each other is pivotal in children's confidence and ability to form their own marriage, it doesn't have to be a perfect marriage. Judith Wallerstein, who studied 131 children of divorce over 25 years, found that children are usually "reasonably content" in an unhappy or failing marriage.¹⁵ Children of divorce have a shattered template for marriage, causing them to distrust marriage and to avoid it for fear of divorce. Studies have found that these children are twice as likely to cohabit before marriage and to divorce.¹⁶

Safety Benefits: Compared to children living with single parents, children conceived by married parents are safer; they are less likely to be aborted¹⁷ and less likely to be abused or neglected. A 1998 study found that children in single-parent families are more than twice as likely to be physically abused than children living with both biological parents.¹⁸

Better Health: Children with married parents have better emotional and physical health than those raised by single parents. A 2000 study from the journal *Pediatrics* found that children from single-parent homes are twice as likely to have emotional and behavioral problems as are children living with both parents.¹⁹

Economic Benefits: Children with married parents fare better economically. In the United States, poverty rates among children living with single mothers are five times higher than those of children living with married parents (35.5 percent versus 7 percent).²⁰ Also, children from intact families are likely to have higher-paying jobs as adults.²¹

Higher Academic Scores: A 2003 study of eleven industrialized countries found that children living in single-parent families have lower math and science scores than children in two-parent families. The correlation between single parenthood and low test scores was strongest among children in the United States and New Zealand.²²

Better Parent-Child Relationships: A study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that children living with their married biological parents spend more time with their fathers and receive more affection and warmth from them than those living with a step- or single father or a cohabiting father figure.²³

Marriage Benefits Adults

Adults, too, are able to enjoy the health, social, and economic benefits of marriage. Marriage allows men and women to form a union and raise a family, as most adults desire to marry and have children.²⁴

Better Health: Married people have better emotional and physical health than unmarried people. A 2004 report from the National Center for Health Statistics found that married people are happier and healthier than widowed, divorced, separated, cohabiting or never-married people, regardless of race, age, sex, education, nationality, or income.²⁵ Compared to people of other marital statuses, the study found that married people have the least limitations in normal daily activities, including work, getting dressed, remembering, and walking. They also experience the lowest amount of serious psychological distress, and drink and smoke less.²⁶

Similarly, a 2000 study found that married persons have the lowest incidences of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.²⁷

Longer Life Span, Less Suicide: Married people live longer and are less likely to commit suicide than those who are not married.²⁸ A 2000 study found that divorced and separated men and women are more than twice as likely as married persons to commit suicide.²⁹

Greater Wealth, Higher Incomes: Married people enjoy greater wealth than unmarried people – and the longer they stay married, the more their wealth accumulates.³⁰ Marriage particularly benefits men’s earning capacities. One study found that married men earn about 22 percent more than men who have never cohabited and never married.³¹ Another study confirmed that marriage itself is what leads to men’s higher incomes; the possibility that men with higher earning potential are more likely to marry has little impact on the “marriage premium.”³²

Safety Benefits: Marriage is the safest relationship for women. A 2002 study found that cohabiting couples reported rates of physical aggression in their relationships three times higher than those reported by married couples.³³ A Department of Justice report found that married and widowed women had the lowest rates of violent abuse by a spouse, while divorced and separated women had the highest rates of violence by their spouse, ex-spouse, or boyfriend.³⁴

Marriage Benefits Society

The social, health, and economic gifts of marriage lead to stronger communities and society.

Less Abortion: Marriage protects human life, as married women are less likely to abort their children than unmarried women. With fewer abortions, human life is more likely to be respected at all stages – from tiny, defenseless embryos to frail, disabled elderly persons.

Safer Homes: Marriage helps make homes safer places to live, because it curbs social problems such as domestic violence and child abuse.

Safer Communities: Communities with more married-parent families will be safer and better places to live because they are less likely to be plagued by substance abuse and crimes committed by young people.

Less Premarital Sex: Marriage also helps to prevent premarital sex, out-of-wedlock births, and sexually transmitted diseases, because young people raised by married parents are less likely to have sex before marriage.

Less Poverty, More Wealth: The economic benefits of marriage for society include less poverty and welfare dependence, because married-parent families are less likely to live in poverty than single-parent families. With fewer people on welfare, governments would have a broader tax base. Along with reducing poverty and welfare dependence, marriage generates more revenue in the economy since married people have higher incomes and greater wealth.

Healthier Society: The main health benefit of marriage is a healthier society. This is because married people have better health than unmarried people and children with married parents are healthier than those with single, cohabiting, or step parents. If people are healthier, health care costs will be lower.

More Marriage, Less Divorce: Married-parent homes are more likely to produce young adults who view marriage positively and maintain lifelong marriages. Divorce, on the other hand, is likely to breed more divorce and often leads young people to have negative attitudes toward marriage and to cohabit before marriage.³⁵

Less Government, Lower Taxes: With more strong marriages, fewer programs such as child support enforcement, foster care, and welfare would be needed to alleviate the effects of broken homes, lessening taxpayers' burdens. According to a recent study, divorce costs the United States \$33.3 billion per year.³⁶ Teen childbearing costs U.S. taxpayers about \$7 billion annually for increased welfare,

incarceration, and foster care costs as well as lost tax revenue due to government dependency.³⁷

More Engaged Citizens: Married people are more likely than unmarried people to vote, volunteer in social service projects, and get involved in their churches and schools.³⁸

Strengthening Marriage

The institution of marriage can be strengthened in a variety of ways, including enacting laws to implement pro-family tax reform, no-fault divorce reform, welfare reform, abstinence-until-marriage programs, and premarital education. Community initiatives such as Marriage Savers have also been effective in strengthening marriage and reducing divorce.

Tax Reform: Our tax system should encourage marriage, childbearing, and adoption. The marriage penalty, under which married couples pay higher taxes than single people or cohabiting couples, should be eliminated. Legislation passed by Congress in 2001 that provided for a gradual phase-out of this penalty will expire in 2011; it should be made permanent. This same tax bill, combined with later revisions, also provided for a phased-in doubling of the per-child tax credit, from \$500 to \$1,000, and a doubling of the adoption tax credit, from \$5,000 to \$10,000. These reforms also need to be made permanent.

Divorce Reform: It should become more difficult to obtain a divorce. The unrestricted access to no-fault divorce has contributed to our high divorce rate. Today, nearly all states have no-fault divorce laws, which allow a spouse to file for or obtain a divorce for any reason without obtaining the consent of the other spouse, thus making the divorce process unilateral and rendering powerless the spouse who wants to preserve the marriage.

Several states have tried to restrict divorce by proposing legislation or passing laws which require mutual consent, longer waiting periods, or classes for divorcing parents before a divorce can be obtained. In addition, three states have passed covenant marriage laws, which give couples a choice between a standard marriage license, which allows no-fault divorce for any reason, and a covenant marriage license, which requires premarital counseling and longer waiting periods or proof of fault before divorce.³⁹

The Louisiana Model: Louisiana's Covenant Marriage Act went into effect in 1997. The bill was authored by then-state representative and current FRC President Tony Perkins. Similar covenant marriage laws have been instituted in Arkansas and Arizona, and legislation has been introduced in Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Louisiana's covenant marriage law requires premarital counseling and places restrictions on no-fault divorce. The counseling covers the seriousness of covenant marriage, reinforces the notion that marriage is a lifelong commitment, and requires the couple to commit to seek marital counseling for problems that arise.

Under Louisiana law, divorce or separation may be obtained in a covenant marriage only after a couple that has not obtained a legal separation has lived apart for two years. Couples without children who have obtained a legal separation must wait one year before divorcing; separated couples with children are required to wait 18 months.

Grounds for divorce or separation include proof of adultery, conviction of a felony with a sentencing to death or imprisonment at hard labor, abandonment by either spouse for one year, physical or sexual abuse of a spouse or child of one of the spouses, or (for purposes of legal separation only) cruel treatment or habitual intemperance.⁴⁰

More work needs to be done to encourage young couples to choose covenant marriage. A preliminary study found that covenant marriages comprise only about two percent of new marriages in Louisiana.⁴¹ It has been reported that parish clerks of court are discouraging couples from choosing covenant marriage.⁴²

Many couples may also be unaware of the covenant marriage option. According to one study, 40 to 50 percent of spouses who chose the standard marriage option had never heard of covenant marriage, and only 16 percent had discussed the option.⁴³ Those couples who chose covenant marriage have lower divorce rates in the first five years of marriage due to more premarital counseling, lower rates of premarital cohabitation, and wives' strong religious beliefs."⁴⁴

Welfare Reform: The breakdown of marriage is a root cause of poverty, as most welfare recipients are never-married or divorced mothers. When the federal government sought to reform the welfare system in 1996, three of its stated goals were to strengthen marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, and encourage the formation of two-parent families. Some states, such as Oklahoma, Utah, Arizona, Michigan, and Virginia, have used welfare money for pro-marriage efforts. However, other states have not acted decisively to promote marriage. In 2000, less than one percent of combined state and federal welfare costs were spent on these goals.⁴⁵ To remedy this, President Bush has proposed earmarking \$300 million in welfare money for pro-marriage programs such as premarital education classes and marriage mentoring. State and local governments as well as private organizations can apply for the money to develop marriage programs.

Abstinence-Until-Marriage Education: The United States government should adequately fund abstinence-until-marriage programs, because abstinence is the only 100-percent-effective way to prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease.

There are more than 1,000 abstinence-until-marriage programs, which are very effective in teaching young people how to save sex for marriage. They teach young people the benefits of saving sex for marriage, how to have healthy relationships, and how to set goals and make good decisions. Abstinence is presented not merely as a solution to the problems of unwed pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases but also as a “pathway leading to respect for one’s self and others, to healthier relationships, and, eventually, to love and happiness in marriage,” in the words of Heritage Foundation experts.⁴⁶

The federal government has provided some abstinence-until-marriage funding in recent years, but comprehensive sex education and contraception programs, which assume that young people will engage in premarital sex and which promote contraception, receive vastly more funding in comparison. In 2002, abstinence-until-marriage programs received \$144.1 million in government funding, while comprehensive sex-ed programs received \$1.73 billion. In other words government spent \$12 to promote contraception for every dollar spent on abstinence education.⁴⁷

Premarital Education: Several states have passed premarital education laws. Florida’s 1998 Marriage Preservation Act was the first requiring high school students to receive marriage skills education. Additionally, the law gives a discount to couples applying for a marriage license who attend a minimum of four hours of marriage preparation, allowing them to waive the three-day waiting period before the marriage can take place.

In 1999, Oklahoma passed similar legislation – reducing the marriage license fee for those who receive premarital education – followed by Maryland and Minnesota in 2001 and Tennessee in 2002. Several other states have proposed similar bills.

Premarital education is also promoted by such organizations as Marriage Savers, which has implemented community marriage policies in 183 cities in 40 states. Community marriage policies are signed by clergy and judges who agree to require engaged couples to undergo at least four months of marriage preparation.

Married couples trained as mentors administer the marriage preparation, which includes a premarital inventory test to identify a couple’s strengths and weaknesses. They continue meeting with couples after the wedding and also

help couples in troubled marriages. A recent study found that community marriage policies are very effective in reducing divorce rates.⁴⁸

Restoring a Culture of Strong Marriages

Marriage confers many social and economic benefits on children, adults, and society, but it has been severely weakened by feminism, the sexual revolution, and the population-control campaign. The breakdown of marriage over the past four decades has resulted in low rates of marriage, high rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and cohabitation.

America needs to restore a culture in which monogamous, lifelong marriages are the norm and marriage between a man and a woman is treasured as the safest and best haven for children. Then we will have fewer children like Lisa crying out for their father's love. Fortunately, Lisa and her father are slowly trying to patch up their relationship. Lisa's father called her on her birthday – for the first time in nineteen years, and she was elated. Their restored relationship is indeed a blessing, but think how much she would have been spared if her parents hadn't divorced. That's why we need to protect marriage. Pro-marriage policies – as well as community and church marriage-strengthening efforts – will help ensure that all children are nurtured and loved by two married parents.

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Notes

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