



How sticking with it can pay off

Based on the new IMFC report Sticking with it: Canadian research on how marriage benefits children and adults

PETER JON MITCHELL

Senior Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



Young Canadians have grown up in a culture of celebrity divorce and cynicism about the happy ending. Yet most of them envision marrying someday. Marriage retains some allure. Even the unconventional pursuit of love hyped on the *Bachelor* holds out the traditional marriage proposal as the grand prize.

The human desire to partner is natural. Canadian clinical psychologist Sue Johnson points out that we are biologically meant for

attaching, producing hormones such as oxytocin that bond human mates.¹

Johnson argues that “monogamy is not only possible, it’s our natural state.”² Formalizing a partnership in marriage, writes Johnson, “allows full emotional commitment”, creating the setting for the growth of a long-term bond.³

The new IMFC report *Sticking with it* features Canadian data showing that healthy marriage benefits adults and their children. Certainly healthy, successful people emerge from a variety of family backgrounds and indeed, marriage isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. But sticking with it, when it is safe to do so, can be rewarding.

Marriage benefits adults


Marriage remains a fairly stable relationship form. Canadian data shows that marriages are less prone to dissolution than cohabiting relationships.⁴ Even living together before getting married is correlated with an elevated risk of divorce.⁵

Stable marriage contributes to economic wellbeing. Certainly the potential leveraging of two incomes and shared domestic labour helps, but it is not the whole story. Statistics Canada reported that a family’s ability to pay for basic needs improved for two-parent families during the 80s and 90s but unfortunately worsened for female lone-parent families during the same period.⁶

Anyone who has experienced a divorce knows that family dissolution can be financially devastating. Studies show that women take a more substantial hit to their income after divorce than men, though some scholars argue that this gender gap is closing.⁷ Either way, divorce hurts emotionally and financially.

Marriage benefits children

Parenting is a difficult task. And while thriving children come from a variety of family backgrounds, research points to the benefit of stable, two-parent families. Children in lone-parent homes are more likely to experience emotional distress, anxiety and hyperactivity than children from two-parent homes.⁸



Children in lone-parent homes are more likely to experience emotional distress, anxiety and hyperactivity than children from two-parent homes.

Experiencing family change may be a contributing factor. A 2003 study found that children who experience family change are more likely to exhibit emotional and behaviour issues such as hyperactivity, fighting and hurting others.⁹ A 2014 study compared outcomes for children who lived with married, biological parents and those with cohabiting, biological parents before the age of one. Examining behavioural outcomes four to five years later, researchers found that the children with cohabiting biological parents were more likely to display hyperactivity and lack of impulse control.¹⁰

Children's educational attainment is strongly linked to family background. Authors of a 2012 study conclude that "marriage and biological parentage is the crucial distinction between families."¹¹ Children from married, biological families were more likely to pursue post-secondary education than their peers from cohabiting and stepfamilies.¹²

No one should pre-judge children's abilities because of family background. Adults making decisions about partnerships, however, should consider the potential impact on children.

Strong families for a strong society

Thriving families help build viable societies. No one enters marriage thinking it will fail, but when families dissolve there are emotional and financial implications for members that reverberate through the wider community. A previous IMFC study estimated that the public cost of family breakdown is about seven billion dollars a year.¹³ That's the equivalent of hosting the Vancouver winter Olympics every year. While social programs provide a safety-net, the people closest to a family in crisis within communities and social networks have significant potential in supporting adults and children.

Conclusion

The desire for long-term marriage is compatible with our social nature. Marriage doesn't come with guarantees, nor is it a cure-all for social problems and relationship issues. Familiarity with the body of research, however, empowers Canadians to make informed choices about their own families. Perhaps too, those facing difficulties in their marriage, may find the encouragement to stick with it.

¹ Johnson, S. (2013). *Love sense. The revolutionary new science of romantic relationships*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, p.130.

² Johnson, (2013). *Love sense*, p. 21.

³ Johnson, (2013). *Love sense*, pp. 154-155.

⁴ Ménard, F. (2011). What makes it fall apart? The determinants of the dissolution of marriages and common-law unions in Canada. *McGill Sociological Review*, Vol. 2, pp. 59-60. Retrieved from <http://www.mcgill.ca/msr/volume2/article4>

⁵ Le Bourdais, C., Neill, G., and Turcotte, P. (2000). The changing face of conjugal relationships. *Canadian Social Trends*, no. 56, p. 15. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/11-008-x1999004-eng.pdf>

⁶ Kerr, D. and Bélanger. (2000). Family and demographic changes and the economic well-being of preschool-age children in Canada, 1981-1997, p.159.

⁷ Gadalla, T.M., (2009). Impact of marital dissolution on men's and women's incomes: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50, pp. 56, 60.

⁸ Ram, B. and Hou, F. (2003). Changes in family structure and child outcomes: Roles of economic and familial resources. *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 317-319.

⁹ Ram & Hou, (2003). pp. 313-314.

¹⁰ Gosselin, J., Romano, E., Bell, T., Babchishin, L., Hudon-ven der Buhs, I., Gagné, A. and Gosselin, N. (2014). Canadian portrait of changes in family structure and preschool children's behavioral outcomes. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, Vol. 38, Iss. 6, p. 523.

¹¹ Wu, Z., Schimmele, C.M, Hou, F., and Oulette, N. (2012). Family structure and university enrollment and completion. Presented at 2012 Population Association of America Annual Meeting. p. 19 Retrieved from <http://paa2012.princeton.edu/papers/120858>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Walberg, R. and Mrozek, A. (2009). Private choices, public costs. How failing families cost us all. Ottawa: IMFC. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/private-choices-public-costs>