

# Opinion

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DEMOCRAT

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## A good marriage still pays off

**I**t has been a tough year for marriage.

Earlier this year, many of us were stunned to learn about the divorce of Al and Tipper Gore after 40 years of marriage. Who would have thought the Gores would split up and the Clintons would stay together?



**Richard Albertson**

My View

Now comes "The Decline of Marriage and the Rise of New Families," a new research report by the Pew Research Center. Nearly four-in-ten adults (39 percent) say marriage is becoming obsolete, up from 28 percent in 1978. At the same time, child-bearing and cohabitation are rising dramatically among young people. More children are living with unmarried parents than ever before. If you pay attention to all the chatter in the media about this report, you would think the institution of marriage is dying.

Does marriage still matter?

The benefits of marriage have been exhaustively researched, and the verdict is conclusive. Healthy marriage has a positive impact on men, women and children in every leading social indicator. Married people are happier, healthier, wealthier, better-educated and have better sex lives.

Healthy marriages are good for economic development and reduce crime. Children in married households are less likely to be poor, suffer abuse, experience depression or be involved in risky behaviors, and more likely to do well in school.

If the benefits of marriage are so clear and compelling, why are fewer people getting married?

One explanation is that our young people have grown up witnessing too many divorces and not enough healthy marriages. No wonder they are skeptical about marriage. The online dating service eHarmony asked 500 people to describe the marriage they most admired. Nearly half could not recommend even one healthy, exemplary marriage.

Young people are afraid of divorce. Their solution has greatly contributed to the decline of marriage and the notion that marriage is "obsolete." Cohabitation is considered to be an efficient, low-cost, no-hassle alternative to marriage, a "test-drive" without the strings of marriage attached.

We must squarely confront the seductive myth of cohabitation and point out some inconvenient facts. Cohabitation is excellent practice for breakup and divorce. According to a 2006 Cornell University study, 90 percent of all cohabiting relationships end within five years. This 90-percent

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failure rate is much higher than the 40-percent to 50-percent failure rate for first marriages.

Janice Crouse, in her book "Children at Risk," states "many cohabiting couples say that they want to live together to see if they are compatible, not realizing that cohabitation is more a preparation for divorce than it is a way to strengthen the likelihood of a successful marriage." Crouse also reported that men who cohabit are four times more likely to cheat than married men, women who cohabit are eight times more likely to cheat than married women, and cohabiting couples are four times more likely to be in poverty than married couples.

Another contributing factor to marital decline found in the Pew report was "a new 'marriage gap' in the United States that is increasingly aligned with a growing income gap." The Great Society's welfare machine contributed to this marriage gap by mowing down countless marriages and families in low-income

communities. Our mindless bureaucratic system punishes people who get married by cutting government benefits, and rewards people who get divorced by increasing benefits. Our well-intentioned welfare system has virtually wiped out marriage in low-income communities.

Finally, most couples young and old do not know *how* to be married. After they tie the knot, many married couples wonder if they married the wrong person. Most of the time the problem is not that they married the wrong person. The problem is that most couples do not know *how* to be married.

Due in large part to a growing marriage education movement, there have never been more resources available to help couples learn how to have a happy, healthy marriage. According to Julie Baumgardner, board president of the National Association of Relationship and Marriage Education, "marriage education educates, equips and empowers individuals with the relationship-development skills and tools necessary to form healthy relationships, build strong marriages and maintain safe and stable families for the well being of children, adults and communities."

Despite some of the findings in the Pew report, marriage will never be obsolete. Marriage still matters.