



FocusFamilyINSIGHT

Ministry Strategy – Family Formation Research

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To: Jim Daly and Interested Students of the Family

Re: Premarital Sex and Greater Risk of Divorce

Are there practical consequences of pre-marital sex for future marital happiness?

This is a question many young people ponder. Even if you grow up with a faith or belief system that teaches sex before marriage is wrong, many wonder what real, practical difference engaging in unmarried sex might have beyond the risk of unmarried pregnancy or contracting an infection.

Well, here's one: New data emerging consistently for decades show that premarital sexual activity seems to be associated with a significant elevated risk of divorce. And, as nearly all people enter marriage desiring it last, this is not a small consideration for teens and young adults.

Let's look at the handful of leading population-based studies exploring this question and what they find.

Kahn and London, 1991

Data from the National Survey of Family Growth indicate that “women who are sexually active prior to marriage faced considerably higher risk of marital disruption than women who were virgin brides.” These scholars explain that even when controlling for various differentials between virginal and non-virginal groups -- such as socio-economics, family background as well as attitudinal and value differences -- “non-virgins still face a much higher risk of divorce than virgins.”¹

Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, 1994

The massive and highly respected National Health and Social Life Survey, conducted at the University of Chicago, was the first serious, fully reputable study of sexual behavior in America. It found a marked connection between premarital sex and elevated risk of divorce. The authors explain:

- “For both genders, we find that virgins have dramatically more stable first marriages...”²
- “The finding confirms the results reported by Kahn and London...those who are virgins at marriage have much lower rates of separation and divorce.”³

Additionally,

- “Those who marry as non-virgins are also more likely – all other things being equal – to be unfaithful over the remainder of their life compared with those spouses who do marry as virgins.”⁴

This higher prevalence of marital infidelity among the non-virginal is assumed to be an important factor in their higher likelihood of divorce, while “those who are virgins at marriage are those who go to greater lengths to avoid divorce.”⁵ Essentially, non-virgins typically appear to do more to harm their marriages and virgins do more to strengthen them.

¹ Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, “Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53 (1991): 845-855.

² Edward O. Laumann *et al.*, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 503.

³ Laumann, 1994, p. 503-505.

⁴ Laumann, 1994, p. 505.





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Heaton, 2002

In a study looking at factors impacting increased marital stability, Brigham Young sociologist Tim Heaton examined how premarital sexual experience, premarital child-bearing, cohabitation and marrying someone of a different religious faith were all associated with greater risk of divorce. Heaton explains, “Dissolution rates are substantially higher among those who initiate sexual activity before marriage.” Heaton asserts that divorce is more likely among the sexually active and cohabitators because they have established their life together on “relatively unstable sexual relationships.”⁶

Teachman, 2003

Sociologist Jay Teachman examined how both premarital sex and cohabitation impacts risk of divorce among women. He found that “[i]t remains the case, however, that women with more than one intimate relationship prior to marriage have an elevated risk of marital disruption.”⁷

Paik, 2011

This newest study looks specifically at first sexual experience in adolescence and was conducted by Professor Anthony Paik at the University of Iowa. He explains that his “research shows that adolescent sexuality/premarital sex is associated with marital dissolution” and that a significant factor is whether the sexual experience in later adolescence was welcomed by the girl. He explains, “Adolescent sexual debut that is not completely wanted is both directly and indirectly linked to marital dissolution” which are the overwhelming majority of adolescent sexual experiences for girls.⁸ Seldom do they report not being pressured or forced into sex.

Paik also found that females who first had sex in their teens had roughly *double* the risk of divorce later in life compared to women who had their first unmarried sexual experience in their adult years.

He found that teen girls who experienced their first sexual experience with a young man who would eventually be her husband did not have particularly elevated risk of divorce. However, very few of girls who lose their virginity in their teens end up having only had sex with their husband. The overwhelming majority of non-virginal adolescent girls – nearly all – end up having had sex with multiple partners before marriage, thus increasing their later risk for divorce.⁹

Conclusion

Science is now showing us what our grandmothers and pastors knew all along. Having sex with someone who is not our spouse can have a real, measurable and harmful impact upon later relationships.

When we give ourselves away – and sex is a full giving of ourselves away physically, emotionally, spiritually – to someone outside the commitment and protection of marriage, it breaks down an important part of us, making our future relationships more unhealthy and difficult to sustain.

Young adults have a right to know about this sort of empirical information because of its very real potential impact on their later, most-important relationships.

⁵ Laumann, 1994, p. 505.

⁶ Tim B. Heaton, “Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States,” *Journal of Family Issues*, 23 (2002): 392-409, p. 401, 407.

⁷ Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 444-455, p. 454.

⁸ Anthony Paik, “Adolescent Sexuality and Risk of Marital Dissolution,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73 (2011): 472-485, p. 483, 484.

⁹ Paik, 2011, p. 479.
