



Why Get Married? More and More Couples Choose to Have Kids Out of Wedlock

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Last year, my boyfriend of eight years and I took our then 3-year-old daughter to see Disney's *The Frog Princess*. I hope I'm not giving away too much when I tell you that the movie culminates in a marriage between a beautiful young woman and a dashing foreign prince (both of whom had recently escaped frog-enchantment). For most of the film my daughter was pretty quiet, but in the middle of the wedding scene, she stood up and loudly declared, "I don't like them getting married. It's boring!" If the results of a new survey are to be believed, she's not the only who has adopted this perspective.

The survey in question was released in March by the Pew Research Center and it asked questions about marriage and parenthood. Among other things, it revealed that while matrimony hasn't exactly been relegated to the history books, views on the necessity of this institution—both as a statement about a relationship, and as a prerequisite for parenting—are shifting. For example, only 30 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed said that, in life, having a successful marriage "is one of the most important things." Also noteworthy, 66 percent of respondents in that age group disagreed with the statement that "unmarried, but coupled parenthood is bad for society."

For people over 30, the number went down a bit, but at 55 percent, the majority also didn't seem too concerned about the negative impact created by such families. Additionally, the survey found that 12 percent of 18- to 29-year-old mothers are currently unmarried but living with their partners. Though that isn't a huge number, it's almost twice as many couples in this position as there were when Pew asked the same question back in 1998. Of course, it isn't exclusively Millennials who are raising children with partners they aren't married to. According to the latest census, 1.5 million American families of all ages are made up of kids living with their unmarried parents.

Two of those kids happen to be mine, and while I think of our family as pretty traditional with one mom, one dad, two kids and one cat, it doesn't take Mike Huckabee ranting about the bad example set by Natalie Portman's "out of wedlock" baby to remind me that in America, once you have kids, not being married still isn't the norm. That's not the case in some European countries, where unmarried but cohabitating parents are about to become the majority, if they aren't already. In Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Bulgaria, for example, 50 percent of all children are born to unmarried couples.

For one of these couples, 31-year-old Jenny Litzberg and her partner, 35-year-old Johan Brink, of Gothenburg, Sweden, having a child together seemed much more natural than did getting married. As Litzberg says, "We don't feel that we need to. We are not religious people and we surround ourselves with friends and family who often share our beliefs. We do not feel alone in our choice. To get married is not so much about religion, or money, or

security as it may be for people in other countries. With some work you can get the same rights and responsibilities as if you were married. So if, or when, you choose to get married it's more like the icing on the cake."

The vibe is a little different in America, where unmarried parents are still viewed as something of an anomaly, and where rights that are automatically granted to married parents often have to be legally established by those who are not. Amazingly, one of these is recognition of paternity. Brette Sember, an attorney and the author of, *Unmarried With Children: The Complete Guide for Unmarried Families*, explains, "When a child is born to unmarried parents he or she only has a legal father if the father is placed on the birth certificate and/or entered into the state putative father registry."

In addition to making sure that fathers are officially recognized, Sember advises unmarried parents to create or obtain a custody order that makes it clear what their rights are in regard to the child. As she says, "Married parents don't need to do this – they are assumed to both be parents with rights to the child. But once your child is in school, a custody order becomes necessary [if parents aren't married]. Some schools insist on having one so that they understand what the parents' rights are."

Of course, nowhere have the inequities of tying rights to matrimony been highlighted more clearly than in the fight for gay marriage. Still, most of the conversations on this front have been about the need for marriage equality, and not about the advantages of separating benefits from marriage. But these days, the possibility that gay marriage will be cheerfully legalized in Utah almost seems more likely than the possibility that we will have the choice to leave our social security checks to anyone other than a federally recognized husband or wife. It simply doesn't seem to matter how many divorces, not to mention how many "out of wedlock" children, or secret same-sex affairs, a room of politicians might have between them, most legislators have no interest in challenging the central role of marriage. Indeed, in addition to offering benefits to married couples which are denied to those who choose not to—or aren't able to—participate in this legal bond, the government promotes marriage through what it calls Healthy Marriage Initiatives. These state and federal programs are based on 1996 Congressional findings which determined that, "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society," and that, "marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children."

When President George W. Bush first unveiled his version of this program there was some outrage over the stated purpose: to cure poverty among single mothers by encouraging them to marry and by providing financial incentives for them to do so. Obama's own Healthy Marriage Initiative has been careful to distance itself from its predecessor by stressing that it does not aim to push anyone into an unhealthy marriage, nor stigmatize single parents, rather it intends to provide marriage support and education. Yet the majority of the program's funding is still directed toward some pretty traditional enterprises, including public advertising campaigns on the importance of marriage, high school education on the value of marriage, and marriage mentoring programs. Mainstream opinion on the subject might be evolving, but marriage is clearly still a deeply entrenched and government-supported institution.

Elected officials aren't the only ones pushing marriage, of course. Popular culture can take its fair share of credit for pounding the importance of this institution into the collective consciousness. If the media is to be believed, marriage (though mainly the wedding part) is just about the most important thing around. Tabloids gush about the most trivial of celebrity

nuptials, reality shows document cutthroat brides-to-be, and movies inevitably end in a happily-ever-after wedding. Needless to say, the world of self help also gets into the act. Type the word “marriage” into Amazon and you are presented with 105,175 books promising to teach you why you aren’t married yet, what you can do to remedy this, and how to fix your marriage when it breaks.

Additionally, for those wanting to lend some authority to the idea that children need married parents, you need look no farther than Princeton University’s Center for Research in Child Wellbeing. A decade ago, this think-tank produced the findings that children born to unmarried parents do not fare as well as children born to married parents since their parents are more likely to be teens, more likely to be poor, more likely to suffer from depression, more likely to abuse substances, and more likely to have been in jail. Armed with such ammunition it can be easy to argue against unmarried parents. Unfortunately, even well-executed research can be distorted in the face of complex realities. So while these finding might be true of the entire unmarried parent population, they fail to separate out the experiences of single unmarried parents, and those of families who are parenting as an unmarried couple, either as a conscious choice, or in the case of gay parents, as the only choice.

According to Nicky Grist, the executive director of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, despite changing attitudes, the view that unmarried parents are bad for kids is still common. She explains that her organization hears regularly from unmarried parents who are experiencing disrespect and discrimination. This can include the inability to put a partner on the family’s health insurance plan, hostility from family members and colleagues, and even court orders requiring unmarried parents to live separately, or risk losing custody of one parent's children from a previous marriage. As she says, “The stories range from heartbreaking to infuriating.”

Given this climate, it is probably not surprising that I have encountered regular inquiries about my family’s choice. From my first pregnancy, when numerous people automatically asked when my boyfriend and I were getting married, to each of my deliveries at a Manhattan hospital where an awkward social worker turned up to provide mandatory counseling and a declaration of paternity, to questions I still field today about my plans for my near decade-long relationship, the implication is that my situation is not the norm. I don’t really mind talking about why I’m not married (though I have to say, I don’t think I have ever asked a married person exactly what was behind the motivation to wed), but I have yet to come up with an explanation that I can give in one easy sound bite.

That’s because, in reality, there are multiple reasons behind the decision, and at different times different ones have seemed more or less important. I care about things like equality, gay marriage and feminism. I find it pretty amusing that in a country where reality show contestants can win a spouse, get married, and then get divorced, all over the course of a few primetime seasons, marriage is still held up as the ideal. Plus, there’s the complicated matter of viewing marriage as a requirement for parenting when upwards of 40 percent of these unions end in divorce. (Not my parents; they recently celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary).

And while my partner and I have to think about things like health care proxies and inheritance taxes, right now not being married just works for us. Plus, I’m pretty sure it works for my kids too. Once or twice my 4-and-a-half-year-old has asked if we were going to get married. But she seems content with the answer that we aren’t, and when the subject

comes up, she likes to point to families we know who are married -- like her maternal grandparents, or my cousin, whose wedding she participated in as a flower girl. And families who aren't -- like her friend Ginger, who has two moms, or her buddy Oliver whose mom and dad aren't married either.

That we have a number of unmarried parent couples in our circle speaks to the increasing acceptance of what was once an utterly taboo subject. But ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the number of children born into such family structures will continue to rise, and how this cohort of kids will turn out. I'm willing to bet, though, that whether or not they are a significant percent of the population, most of these children will turn out as well as their peers, and that if they do make bad choices in the future, these will have relatively little to do with the fact that their parents never bothered to tie the knot.

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