



Contact the National Marriage Week Executive Director Sheila Weber at sheila@letsstrengthenmarriage.org for more information.

Did I Get Married Too Young?

Marriages of people in their early to mid-20s are not nearly as risky as you think.

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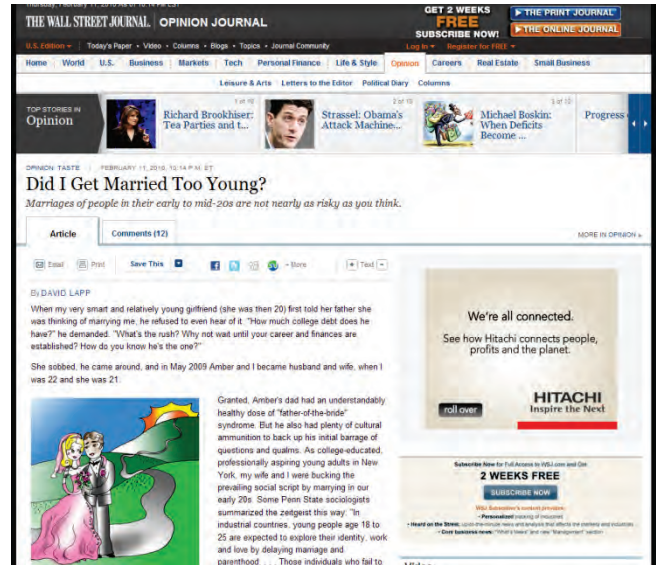
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By DAVID LAPP

When my very smart and relatively young girlfriend (she was then 20) first told her father she was thinking of marrying me, he refused to even hear of it. "How much college debt does he have?" he demanded. "What's the rush? Why not wait until your career and finances are established? How do you know he's the one?"

She sobbed, he came around, and in May 2009 Amber and I became husband and wife, when I was 22 and she was 21.

Granted, Amber's dad had an understandably healthy dose of "father-of-the-bride" syndrome. But he also had plenty of cultural ammunition to back up his initial barrage of questions and qualms. As college-educated, professionally aspiring young adults in New York, my wife and I were bucking the prevailing social script by marrying in our early 20s. Some Penn State sociologists summarized the zeitgeist this way: "In industrial countries, young people age 18 to 25 are expected to explore their identity, work and love by delaying marriage and parenthood. . . . Those individuals who fail to postpone these family transitions miss out on better career opportunities, make poor choices on partners, and may experience problems."



Sara Schwartz

Social scientists frequently note that "early marriage" is the No. 1 predictor of divorce. Additionally, the average student graduating today has about \$23,000 in debt, and money problems don't exactly help a marriage. It's not surprising, then, that many young couples hook up and shack up instead of tying the knot. The median age at marriage today is 28 for men and 26 for women.

So what's a young couple, in love and committed, to do? Was our decision to marry in our early 20s shortsighted and irresponsible?

First, let's take a closer look at that term "early marriage." While it's true that teenage marriages are a significant predictor of divorce, it turns out that marriages of people in their early to mid-20s are not nearly as much at risk. According to a 2002 report from the Centers for Disease Control, 48% of people who enter marriage when under age 18, and 40% of 18- and 19-year-olds, will eventually divorce. But only 29% of those who get married at age 20 to 24 will eventually divorce—very similar to the 24% of the 25-and-older cohort. In fact, Hispanics who marry between the ages of 20 and 24 actually have a greater likelihood of marital success (31%

chance of divorce) than those who first marry at age 25 and older (36% chance of divorce).

Further, a recent study by family scholars at the University of Texas finds that people who wed between the ages of 22 and 25, and remained married to those spouses, went on to experience the happiest marriages. While the authors caution against suggesting that 22 to 25 is the optimal marrying age for everyone, their finding does suggest that "little or nothing is likely to be gained by deliberately delaying marriage beyond the mid twenties."



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What about the money? Social scientists use the term "marriage premium" to describe how, over time, married couples save and build more wealth than otherwise-similar singles or cohabiting couples. Part of the reason is simply that married couples have two incomes to pool and draw from. But as a group of leading family scholars notes in "Why Marriage Matters," a report published by the Institute for American Values, marriage itself appears to encourage thrifty behavior. It makes sense: Knowing that my spending and savings habits affect not just me but also my wife and future family, I'm more likely to set a budget, pack a lunch, and put some money in savings instead of buying that new iPhone. The upshot is that my wife and I are able to pay off our college debt more quickly than we could by ourselves.

Of course, it's not just adults who are skeptical about early-to-mid-20s marriages. As psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett notes in his influential book "Emerging Adulthood," many young people today delay marriage because they are afraid it will deny them the leisure of "identity exploration" and "self-focused development." And as Mr. Arnett explains, "Many of the identity explorations of the emerging adult years are simply for fun, a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before 'settling down' and taking on the responsibilities of adult life." Young people sense that marriage marks the end of adventure and the beginning of monotony. Implicit is the dichotomy between individual fulfillment now and commitment later.

It's a false dichotomy. Instead of trekking to Africa or exploring Rome alone, why not marry the person of your dreams and take him or her along? What about discovering, as the characters Carl and Ellie in Disney Pixar's "Up" do, the good of marital friendship? While they never fulfill their dream of traveling together to South America (their jug of nickels and dimes labeled "Paradise Falls" is shattered with every flat tire and emergency-room visit), they do experience the joy of life together: renovating their home as newlyweds, picnicking and cloud-gazing on lazy summer afternoons, dancing in their candlelit living room after 50 years of marriage.

As focused as we young adults are on self-development, what if the path to that development is actually learning to live with and love another person? We may be startled to find that the greatest adventure lies not in knowing oneself as much as in knowing and committing to another person. Sure, freedom is great—but as John Paul II reminded us, "Freedom exists for the sake of love."

If couples in their early to mid-20s do get married, they'll need plenty of support—especially from their families and houses of worship. The leaders of National Marriage Week USA (Feb. 7 to 14)—an effort to focus national attention on marriage—are encouraging houses of worship to provide premarital counseling to every couple they marry. Parents play an important part as well: whether it's providing startup financial assistance or reminding their children—as a growing body of scholarship demonstrates—that people with a bedrock commitment to the institution of marriage are more likely to invest themselves in their marriages and to experience happier unions.

Did I get married too young? I may not have the freedom to globetrot at my own leisure or to carouse at a bar late into the night. But when I step into our 500-square-foot one-bedroom apartment, warmly lit and smelling of fresh flowers and baked bread, I do have the freedom to kiss my beautiful wife and best friend—the woman I pledged to always love and cherish, and to raise a family with. I have no regrets.

Mr. Lapp is a research associate at the Institute for American Values in New York.