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Preparing Adolescents and Young Adults for Marriage: Developing Realistic Expectations for Family Communication

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Despite the high divorce rate, almost all young adults think of marriage as being one of the most important goals in their lives. In addition, more than 70 percent continue to believe that marriage involves a lifelong commitment that should only be ended under extreme circumstances. Researchers have known for a long time that entering marriage with unrealistic expectations is likely to trigger dissatisfaction and ultimately contribute to the decision to divorce. Moreover, studies indicate that holding unrealistic expectations for marriage is not at all uncommon. This may help to explain why between 40 and 60 percent of new marriages fail within the first 10 years.

One of the most important things parents and educators can do is help adolescents and young adults develop appropriate expectations for marriage. In fact, studies show that premarriage education about relationships helps youth to clarify their expectations so that they become more realistic.

Some of the most commonly violated expectations for marriage center around differences in beliefs about

the proper way to communicate. Problematic communication was named as the most significant factor contributing to relationship distress and a primary factor leading to divorce by a representative sample of Americans in a Roper Starch Poll conducted for the National Communication Association in 1999. Recent research continues to uphold those findings.

Problematic Expectations

Why are expectations about communication so problematic and what, specifically, are the dissonant beliefs that may give rise to these problems? One answer to these questions is found by observing the communication that occurs in family relationships on television. A large and growing number of researchers have noted that television serves as an important source of information about how families should interact. Research has shown that adolescents and young adults develop expectations for family life from television, and that these expectations are associated with the degree of satisfaction they experience with their families. Unfortunately, the communication that

is characteristic of television families is not likely to characterize families in contemporary society. Specifically, television's portrayal of family interaction indicates that:

- Happy families are traditional, nuclear families that adhere to traditional gender roles.
- Parents are rational problem-solvers.
- Most talk is self-disclosive, focusing on relationship issues and ignoring issues of everyday life, such as daily routines and chores.
- Harmony and low levels of family conflict are both valued and typical, and even serious and complex conflicts are easily resolvable in ways that satisfy everyone's concerns.

How realistic are these expectations? Not very!

First, researchers have found that contemporary society includes several types of highly satisfied and well-adjusted families in addition to the traditional gender-defined nuclear group. For example, some happy families stress personally negotiated roles and still others prefer more psychological and emotional distance than is characteristic of conventional families.

Second, parents may strive to be rational problem-solvers, but human beings frequently fail to live up to this ideal in their day-to-day interactions in the real world.

Third, most talk in families centers around the mundane topics of everyday life such as chores and schedules. Talks about relationships, while important, are generally the exception, rather than the rule.

Fourth, conflicts are inevitable and even valuable in thriving relationships. Moreover, serious and complex conflicts require a great deal of effort, commitment, stamina, and time to resolve.

Parents can do a lot to promote the development of interpersonal competence in their children and to prevent the development of unrealistic expectations for marriage and family life by watching television with their children and challenging their children to think about the validity of the interaction presented. Research shows that children's beliefs in information shared during conversations with parents strongly outweighs their beliefs in information acquired from television content. Parents who engage their children in reality testing while viewing television fare may help their children to acquire appropriate and healthy beliefs about interaction in families that will serve them well in their futures.

Sources

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