

NATIONAL POST

Almost 90% of teens hope to get married. Sex ed should reflect this

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PETER JON MITCHELL

Senior Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

About 88 percent of Canadian teens say they expect to marry someday. This is a good thing since there is ample evidence that marriage remains the gold standard for family formation, offering benefits to adults and children alike.

That said, marriage rates have been in general decline over the last number of decades. And Canadians who do marry are waiting longer, entering marriage for the first time at an average age of about 30.

This means people entering marriage have often accumulated much more than a decade of dating.

So just how does any young person find their way to life-long marriage? There are many answers to that.

One place they are extraordinarily unlikely to get any assistance is at school in sex education.

Others have already noted the absence of love in current sex education curricula. Importantly, a discussion of marriage is likewise absent.

This should give us pause since research shows that teen relationship history is linked to future romantic patterns. Teens who engage in numerous short-term relationships or non-romantic sexual relationships are more likely to enter less stable relationships as young adults.

A few years ago the *Journal of Marriage and Family* published a study examining the dynamics between family structure, teen relationships, and later romantic partnerships in young adulthood. "Adolescent relationships form the foundation for relationships later in the life course by providing training for intimacy," wrote the authors.

They also linked parental romantic partnerships to teens' relationship decision making. Teens whose families experienced disruption were more likely to have multiple relationships and casual hookups during adolescence.

The authors concluded that having stable, married parents is closely correlated with the formation of later stable partnerships.

Regardless of family background, helping young adults achieve the healthy marriages they desire requires paying greater attention to their early romantic lives.

It makes sense that teen romantic and sexual relationships, as well as what they witness with their own parents, establish patterns for later relationship development.

Of course relationship history or parental example aren't the sole factors in determining whether someone who wants to get married will. Economics and education play a role, too. Esteemed American sociologist Paul Amato recently pointed to the challenge of the marriage gap between higher educated adults who get and stayed married and those with less formal education who are less likely to marry or stay married.

Canada has a marriage gap along income lines, too.

Yet since the evidence shows teen relationships are the training ground for future intimacy, sexuality education should help students identify the relational patterns and skills that will benefit the future marriage relationships teens say they want.

Ontario's new sexual health curriculum set to be implemented this fall is touted as the most progressive provincial curriculum in Canada, yet it fails to address how teen's current relationships influence later relationship patterns.

The curriculum authors intend health education to play a "key role in shaping students' views about life, relationships, healthy development, physical activity, and how they learn."

By grade seven, students will learn about developing healthy relationships by learning about consent, physical readiness for sexual activity, safer sex and pleasure.

They won't learn about marriage, however. Or the links between early relationships with the success of future partnerships.

Sex education cannot focus exclusively on the short term without advising students how these choices impact later relationship formation.

Marriage remains an important societal institution—all research points in this direction. The barriers to entering a healthy marriage are worthy of study and discussion. It's true that not everyone is interested in marriage, but teens and young adults would be better served if they were presented with information about the future relationship model close to 90 percent say they desire.

Otherwise, our sex education is preparing them for something only online match companies will appreciate: a lifetime of dating.

Peter Jon Mitchell is a senior researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada and co-author of The Canadian Marriage Gap, showing marriage in Canada is declining along income lines. (<http://www.imfcanada.org/canadian-marriage-gap>)