

We believe in stable, safe, and nurturing families.



We believe that relationship education is for everyone.



# Adolescent and Young Adults' Relationship Expectations and Experiences

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<https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr.html>

# Adolescence and young adulthood

- The teen and early young adult years are a life course stage in which there are many changes
  - Complete schooling
  - Leave the parental home
  - Enter the labor force
  - Forming romantic relationships
- These behaviors are part of the *transition to adulthood*
  - Taking longer to undergo these behaviors

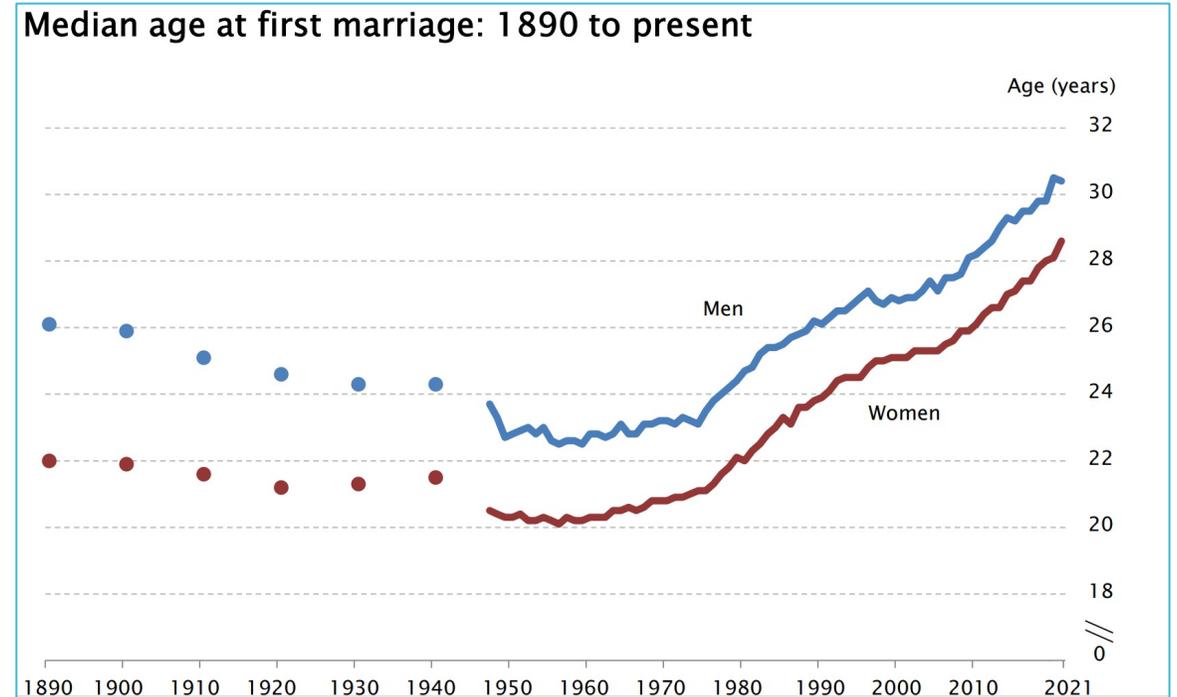


# Trends in family behaviors

- The dating behaviors of today's teens and young adults occurs amid a backdrop of
  - Rising age at marriage
  - Widespread acceptability of cohabitation

# Age at First Marriage

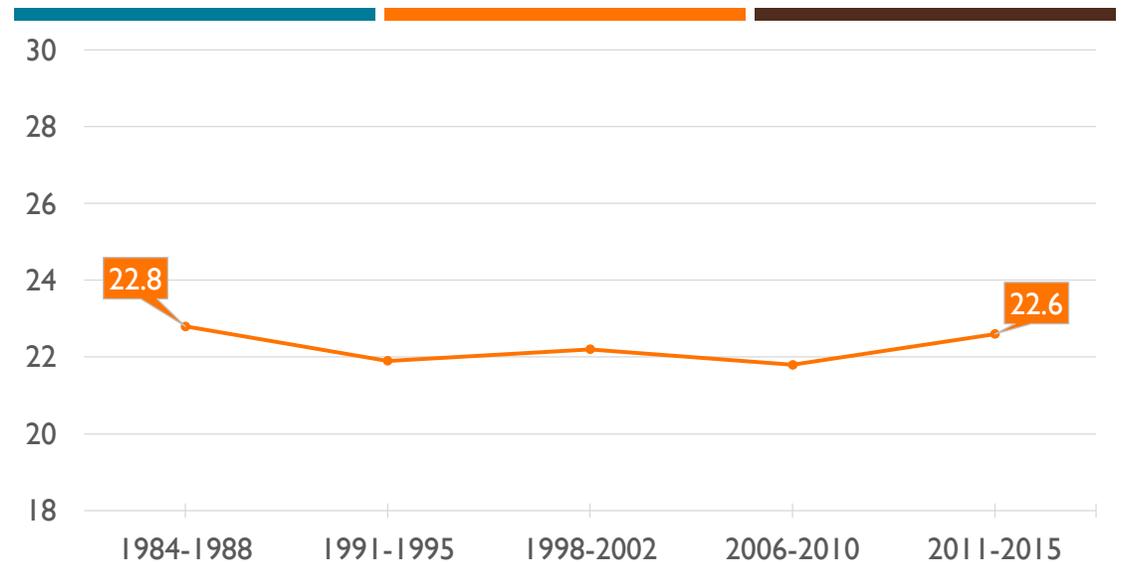
- Age at first marriage continues to rise
- In 2021, the age at first marriage was 28 for women and age 30 for men.



# Age at First Cohabitation

- Age at first cohabitation is age 23 and has remained stable over time
- For most people today, their first experience living with a romantic partner will be in marriage
  - Most newlyweds were living with their partner prior to marriage

## Women's Median Age at First Cohabitation



# Trends in family behaviors

- The dating behaviors of today's teens and young adults occurs amid a backdrop of
  - Rising age at marriage
  - Widespread acceptability of cohabitation
  - Rising age at first birth
  - Declining teen births

# Age at Birth

- Age at first birth continues to rise
- In 2020, the age at first birth was 27 for women (and about 4 years older for men).

## Average age of mother at first birth

Across all areas of the U.S., women are having their first child later in life.

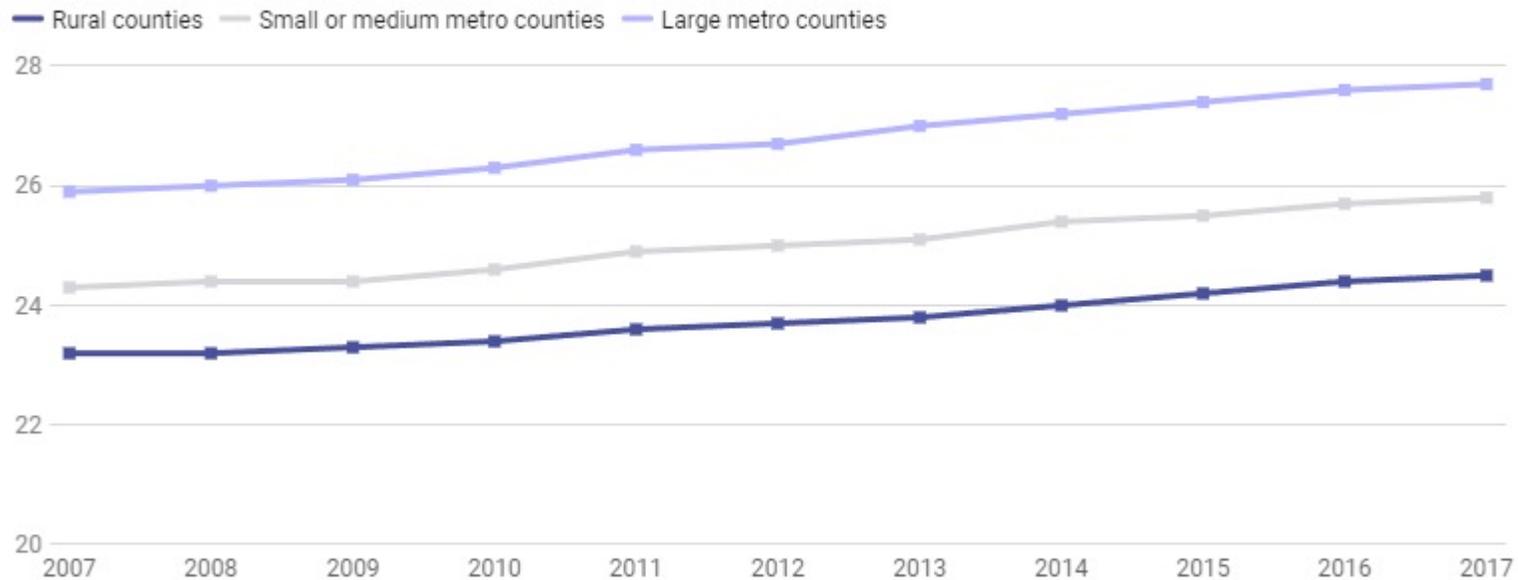
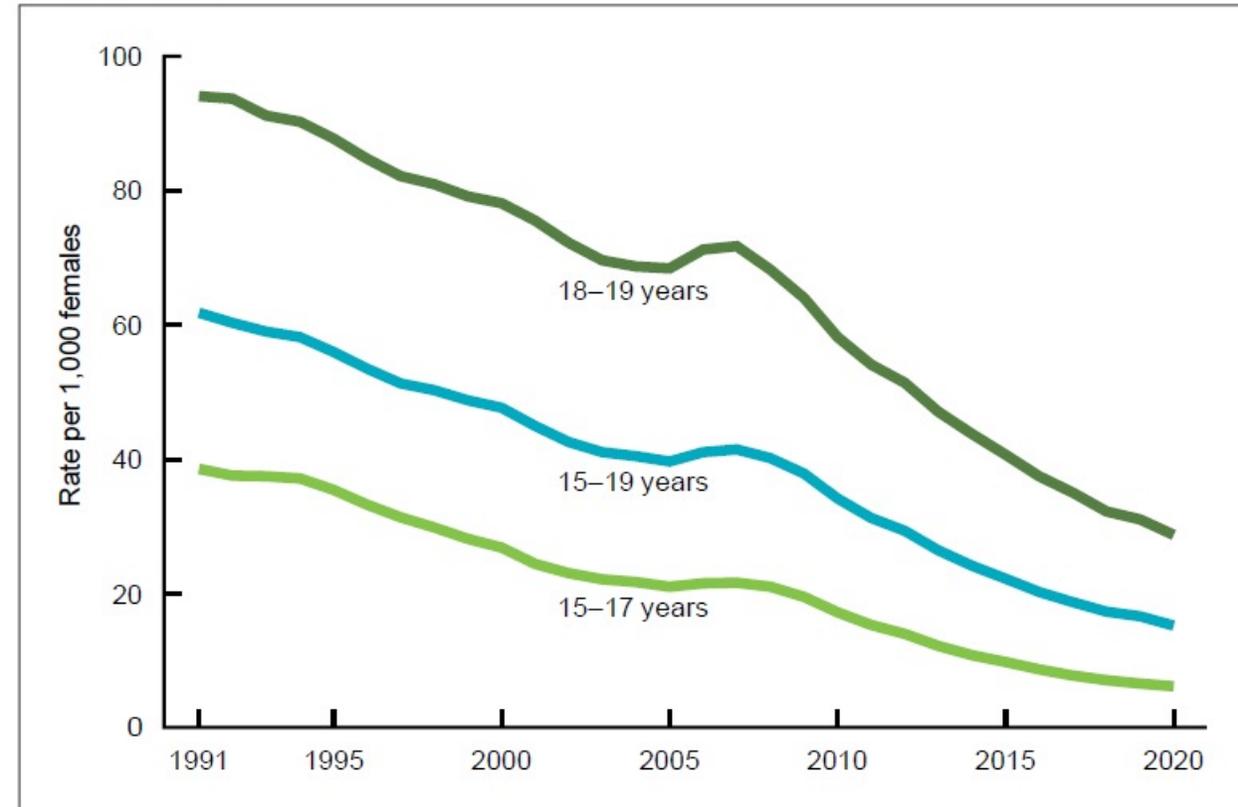


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: [CDC](#) • [Get the data](#)

# Teen childbearing

- Birth rates among teens are declining
- Birth rates for women 20-24 are also declining

Figure 2. Birth rates for teenagers, by age of mother: United States, final 1991–2019 and provisional 2020



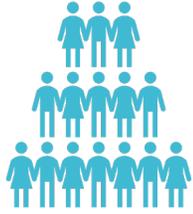
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Natality.

## Webinar goals

Relationship and family expectations and attitudes

Relationship experiences

Relationship quality



Teens (15-19) and young adults (usually 20-25, sometimes up to age 30)



Original research using nationally representative data

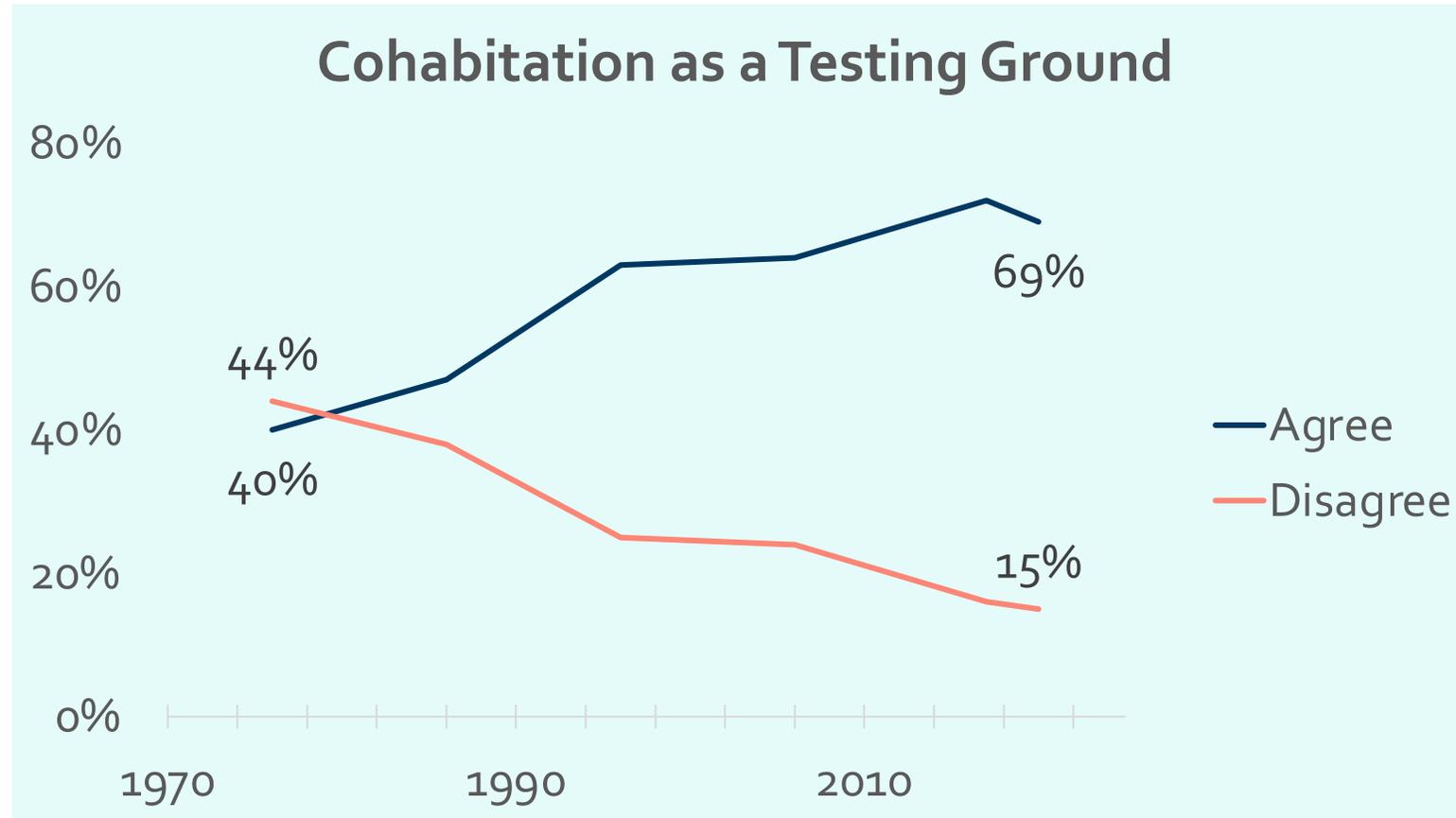


Review studies on teens' and young adults' relationships published since 2010

# Definitions and Approach

# Attitudes toward Cohabitation

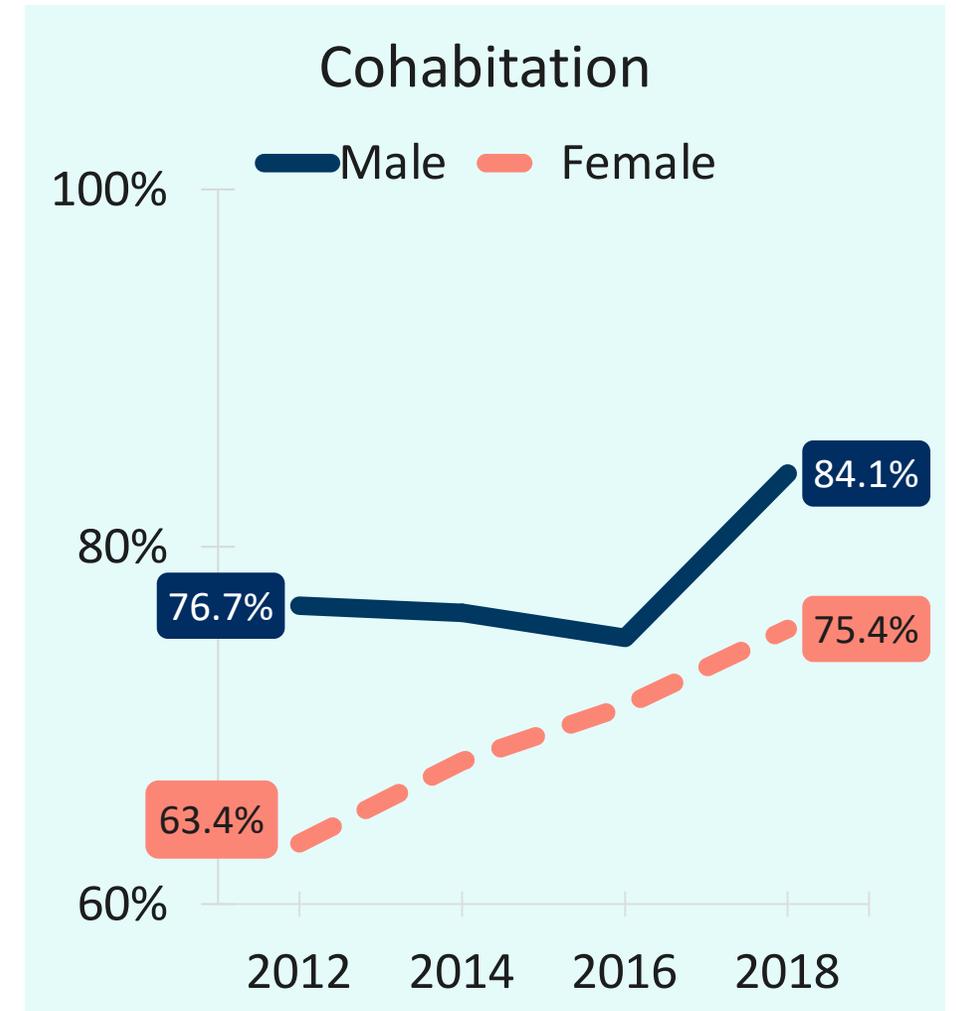
- Teens are increasingly likely to agree that cohabitation is a testing ground for marriage.
  - Share agreeing with the statement: "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along."



Source: NCFMR analyses of Monitoring the Future, 1976-2020

# Expectations of Cohabitation

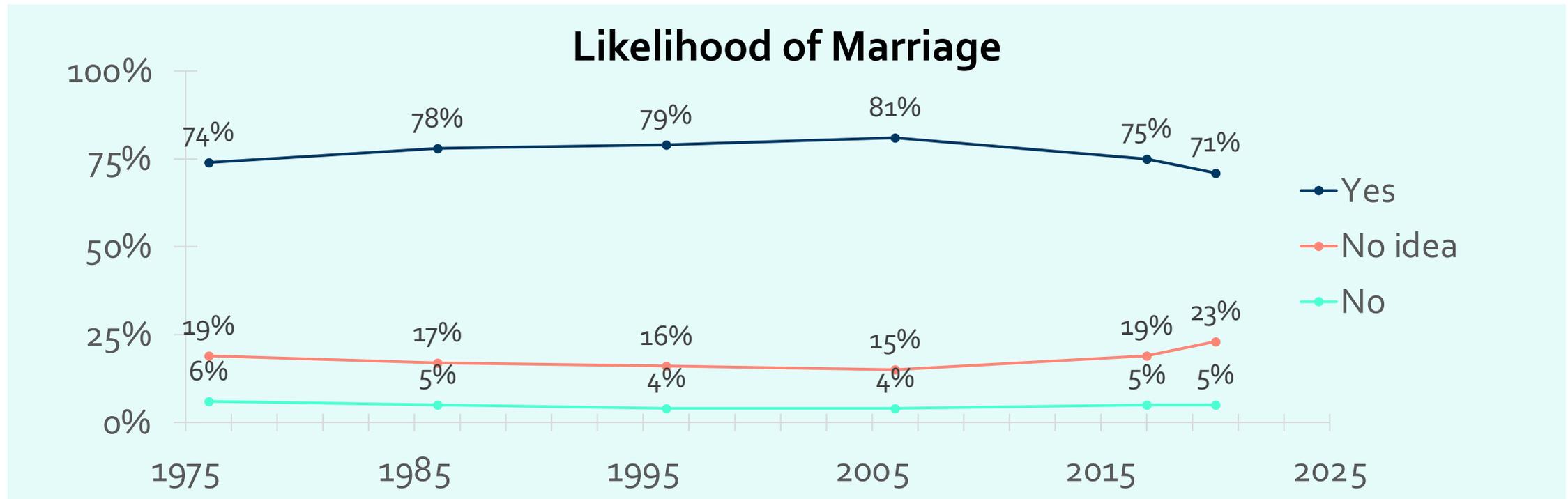
- In general, the share of teens 15-19 who expect to live with a partner is high, especially if the definition includes living with a future spouse prior to marriage
  - About a third of young women 18-24 expect to marry without cohabiting prior to marriage (not shown)
- Over the past decade, the share who expect to cohabit has increased
- A higher share of teen boys than teen girls expect to cohabit



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

# Expectations of Marriage

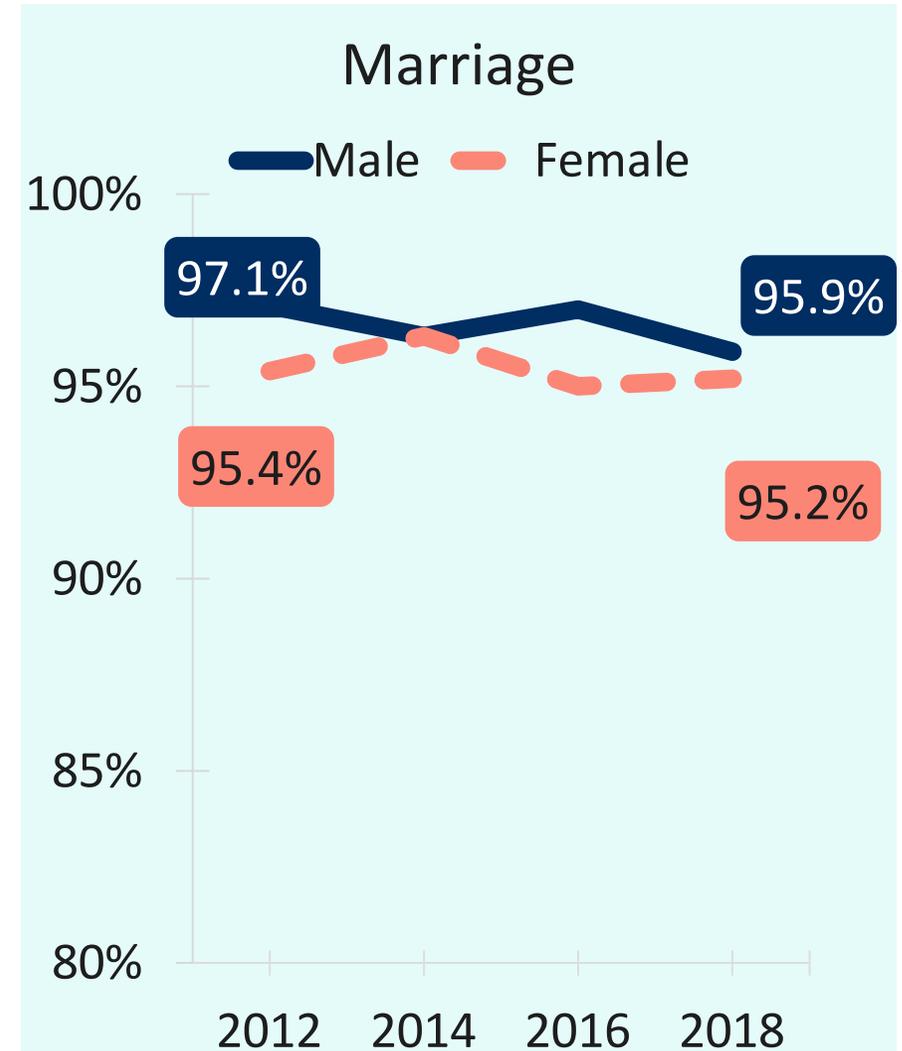
- The majority of teens expect to marry
- There is rising uncertainty about marriage, though little evidence that teens are definitively rejecting marriage
  - Responses to question: "Which do you think you are most likely to choose in the long run?" Choices included: getting married, no idea, or not getting married



Source: NCFMR analyses of Monitoring the Future, 1976-2020

# Expectations of Marriage

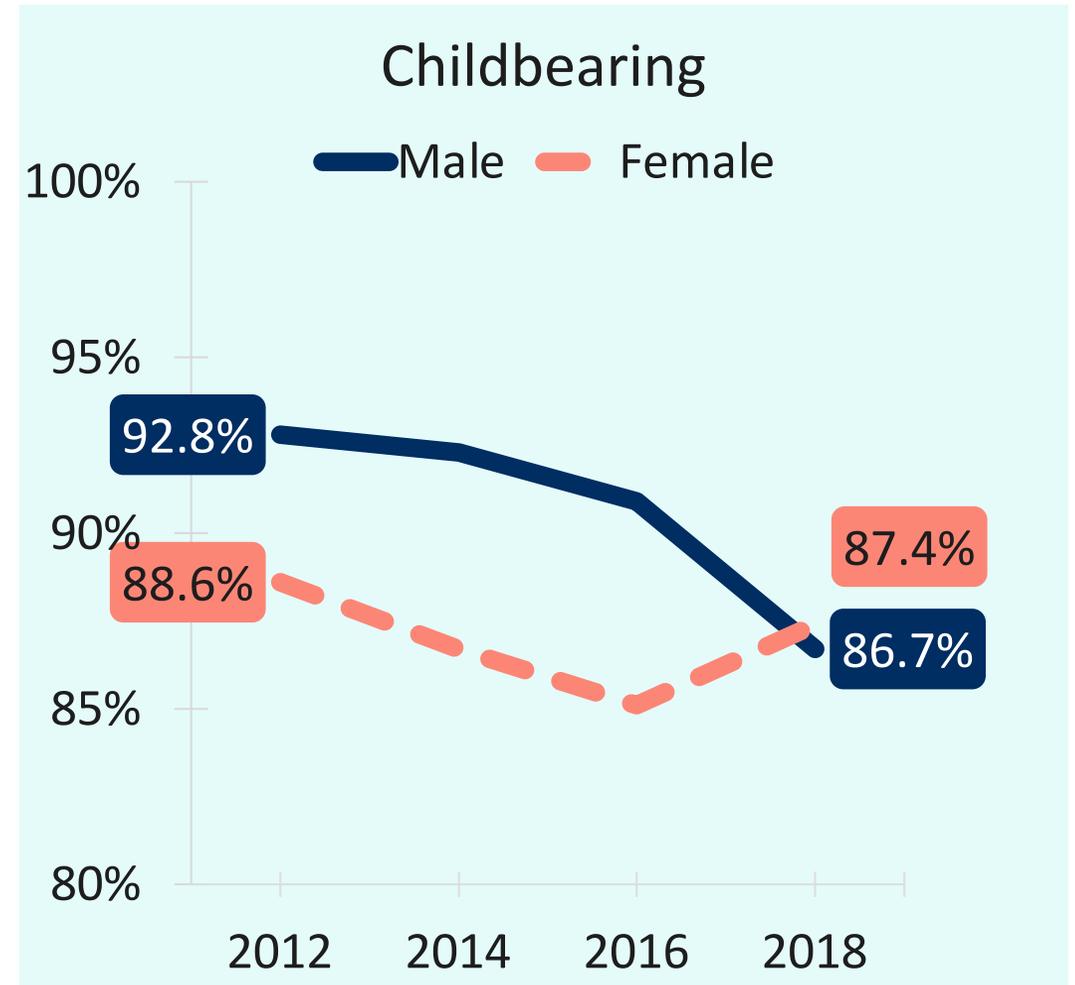
- Question wording may matter
  - “What is the chance you will get married someday?” Probably or definitely yes
    - A greater share of the ‘yes’ responses are in the ‘probably yes’ category
- Also see that gender differences in expectations of marriage are minimal



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

# Intentions to Have Children

- The majority of teens intend to become a parent at some point.
- In recent years, the share of teen boys who intend to have a child has declined by six percentage points
- For teen girls, the share declined between 2012 and 2016 but has since risen
  - Gender differences are now minimal



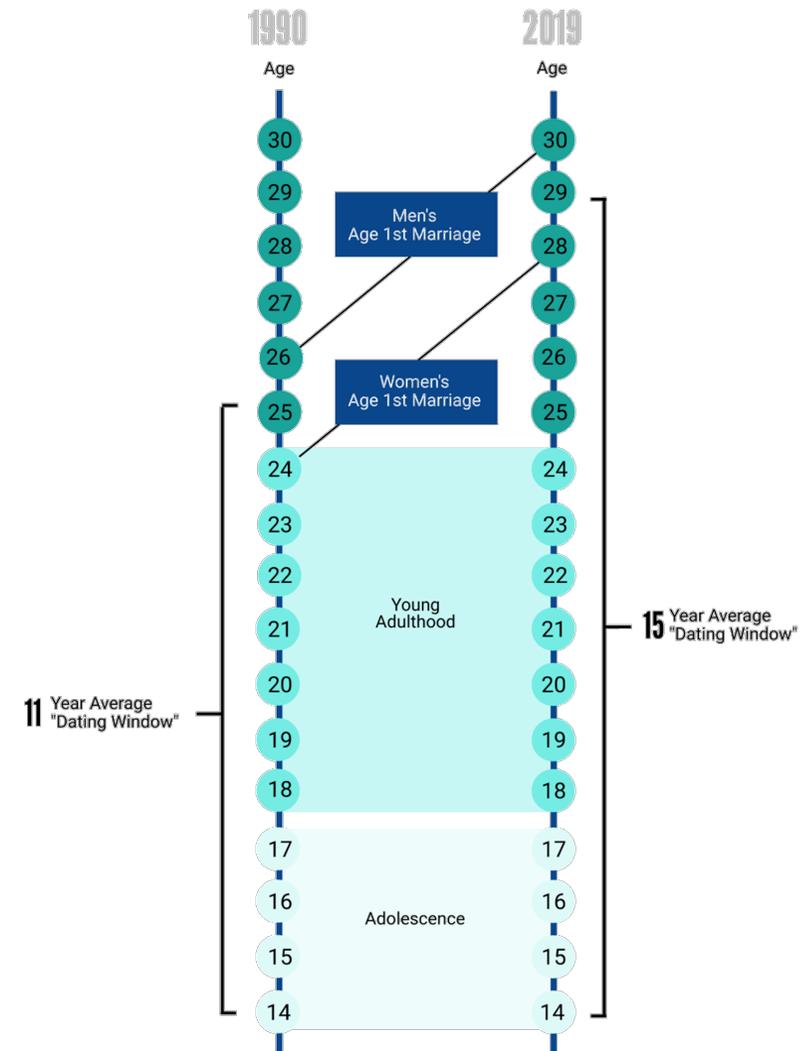
Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

# Relationship and Family Expectations and Attitudes

- The majority of teens expect to cohabit, marry, and have children
- There is some variation in factors linked to these expectations and attitudes
  - Young people in relationships have higher expectations of marriage
  - Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower expectations of marriage but not of cohabitation
- Attitudes, expectations, and intentions to engage in a behavior do not always predict actual behavior

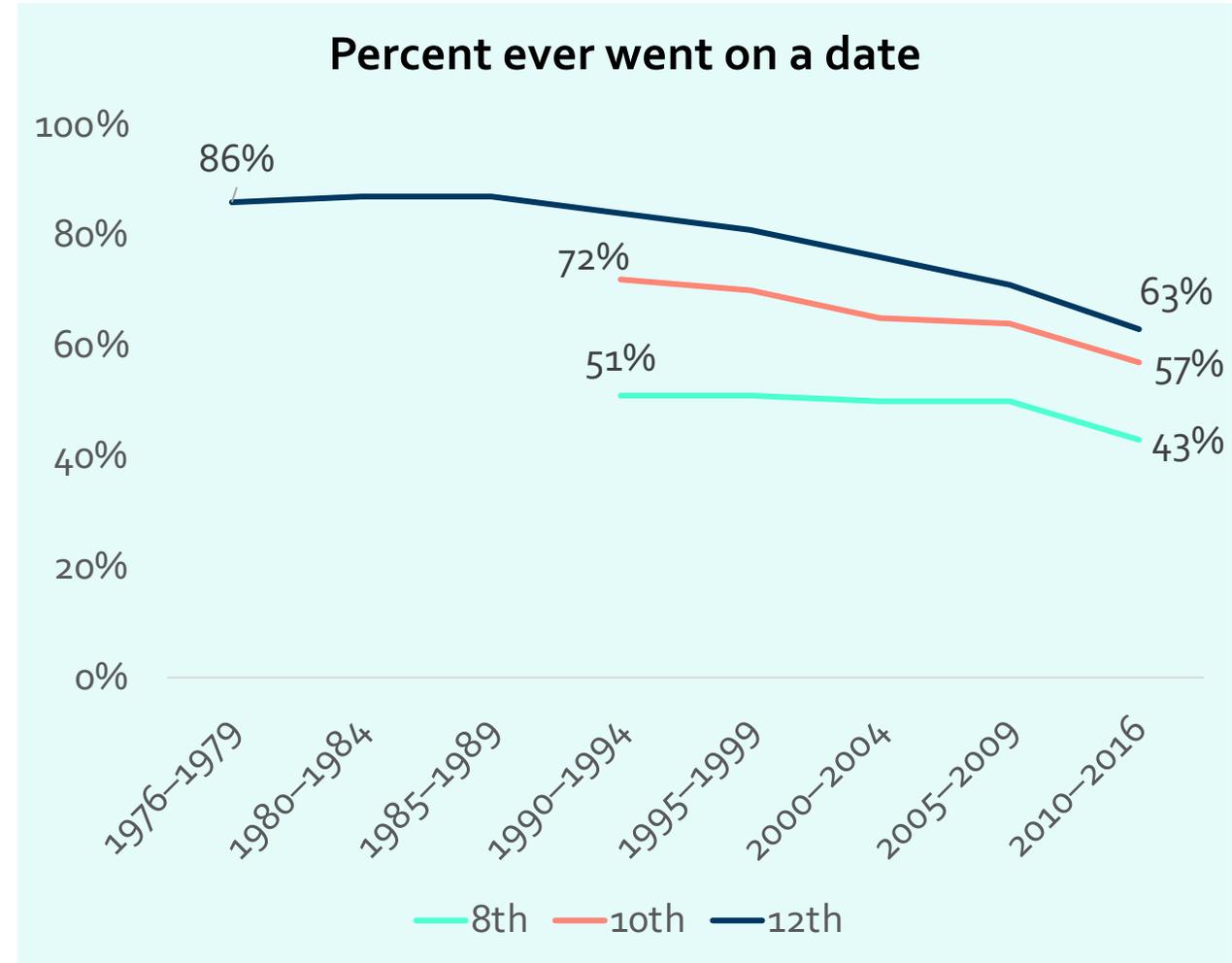
# Relationship experiences

- Cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing are fairly rare during the teen years but becomes more common in the 20s
- Teens (and young adults) are spending more time outside of marriage



# Relationship experiences

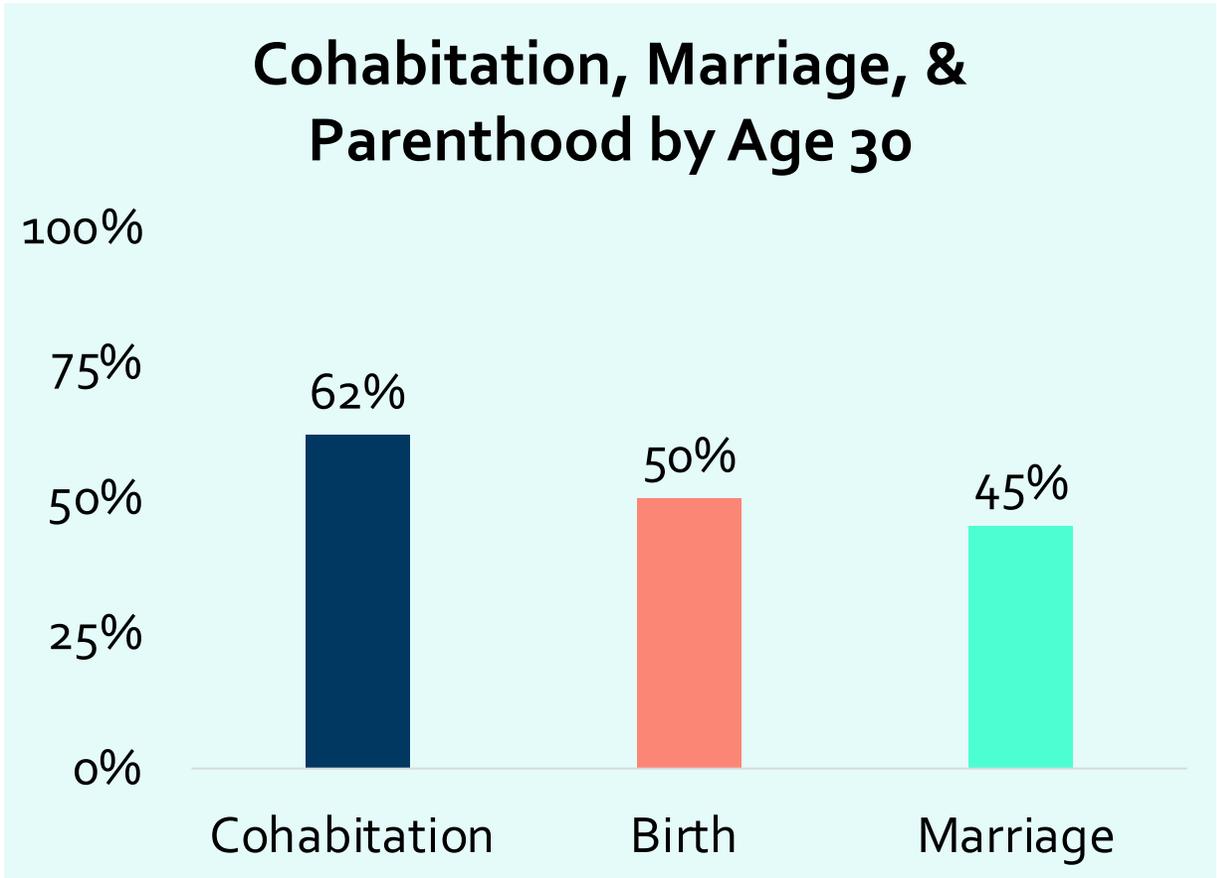
- The share of teens who have ever dated has declined over time
  - The decline may be exaggerated if teens do not use the term 'date' and so do not classify their behaviors as 'dating'
  - Teens' dating activity increases with age
- Less research on dating relationships among teens than on their sexual activity
  - Teens are waiting longer to have sex, but by age 18, two thirds of teens have had sex



Source: Adapted from Twenge & Park, 2017. Using Monitoring the Future Data.

# Relationship experiences

- Fairly little information on the prevalence of dating among those 20 or older
  - Most research pivots to cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 data

# POLL

- Which term do you think teens are most likely to use to describe their romantic relationships?
  - Dating
  - Talking to
  - Hanging out with
  - Hooking up with

# Relationship experiences

- Fewer teens are dating, and both dating and sexual activity are increasingly happening at later ages
- Still, the majority of teens have dated and/or had sex by age 18
- Language used to refer to relationships varies
- Less is known about the prevalence of dating experiences among those 20 and older, as coresidential relationships and parenthood become more common



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# Relationship quality

- Teens and young adults' relationships vary substantially by age
  - Developmentally normal for teens to have shorter, less committed, less stable relationships as they seek to balance interdependence and autonomy
- What aspects of relationship quality are relevant for adolescents and young adults?

## Couple Interaction

- Affection
- Emotional Support
- Instrumental Support
- Coercion
- Controlling behavior
- Criticism

## Satisfaction

- Fulfillment and met needs
- Communication
- Shared activities
- Support

## Context

- Duration of relationship
- Expectations for the future (commitment)
- Union status (dating, cohabiting)

Primarily among young adults

## Relationship quality

Relationships are often short in duration but a substantial minority (about 30-40%) are in committed relationships

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) emerges in adolescence, peaks in the early 20s, and declines in the late 20s

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# Relationship quality: Adolescents vs .Young Adults

As they age from adolescence to young adulthood, teens and young adults generally experience increases in relationship quality

In long-term relationships, adolescents report lower confidence and more conflict in their relationships than young adults

Compared to adolescents, young adults report more intimacy and interdependence

While adolescent and young adult relationships vary in trajectories of stability and quality, most are not volatile

# Relationship quality

- Research on A&YA romantic relationships often focus on the “bad” – instability, churning, IPV
- Most teen and young adult relationships tend to be either committed or exploratory
- Further, when these relationships dissolve, they do so for good reasons – adolescents and young adults break-up with partners when they are not fitting their relationship needs or expectations.

# Relationship quality

Adolescent relationships are important

- Learning Curve - how to 'do' relationships
- Baggage – Trajectories of styles of relationships

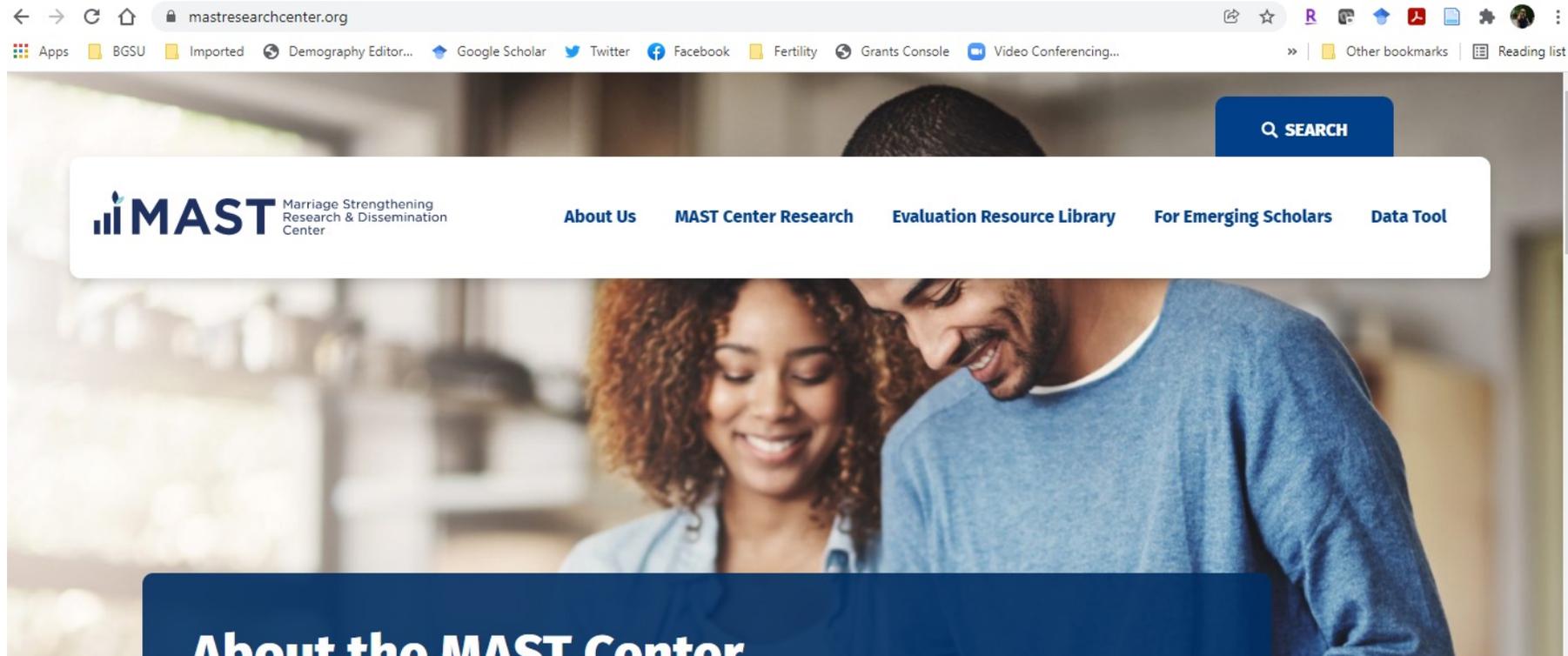


# Implications

- HMRE programming focus on teaching young people how to avoid or exit unhealthy relationships in addition to how to build positive relationship skills
  - It is okay to leave a relationship that does not meet one's needs
  - When possible, consider how to identify and address unhealthy aspects of relationships
- Develop programs that are age-appropriate
- Avoid one-size-fits-all programming
  - Not all teens and young adults want to marry or have children

# Visit the MAST Center for more resources

- Online: [www.mastresearchcenter.org](http://www.mastresearchcenter.org)
- Twitter: [@MASTRResearchCtr](https://twitter.com/MASTRResearchCtr)



## About the MAST Center

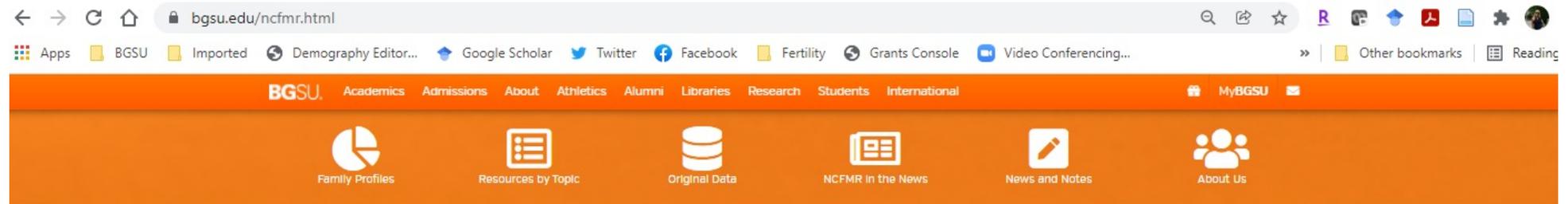
*The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships.*

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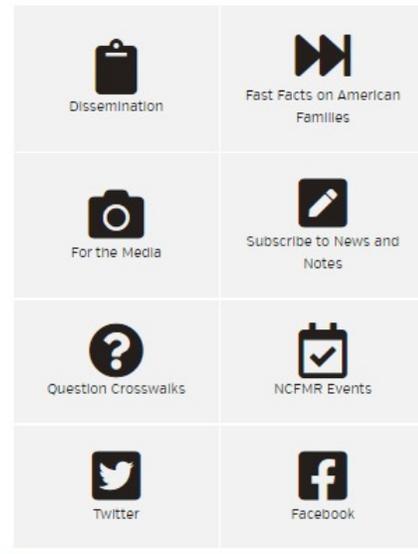
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## National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR)

Bowling Green State University / National Center for Family & Marriage Research [NCFMR]



The National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR) was established in 2007 to help improve our understanding of how family structure is linked to the health and well-being of children, adults, families, and communities and to inform policy development and programmatic responses.

This project is codirected by **Wendy D. Manning** and **Susan L. Brown** with assistance from Bowling Green State University. Support was also provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation from 2007 to 2013.

### News and Stories



Wall Street Journal, December 5, 2021

"There's no longer a single script for how we do marriage. We get married for our own personal happiness and fulfillment, and people define that in various ways."

--Susan L. Brown

Contact

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