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HICKS: Marriage hard, but worth effort

By [Marybeth Hicks](#)

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Marriage is hard. That's what I told the guy sitting next to me on the plane Tuesday when he explained that he and his bride of less than a year have split up, despite the birth several weeks ago of their son.

That's what I told a girlfriend in an e-mail, and another over lunch recently when she shared her fear that she and her husband might not make it through a rocky patch.

That's what I tell myself on any given day, and what I remind my husband when we try each other's patience or expect special skills that simply don't exist. Like mind reading.

Lifelong marriage - once a goal held in the hearts of every newlywed couple - no longer is an expectation even for those who enter the bonds of matrimony with the best of intentions. That is, if they enter matrimony at all.

Two recent studies reveal some startling realities about the state of marriage in America and the trends that impact families, children and the communities we share.

The journal "The Future of Children," a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, devotes its most recent issue to the subject of "fragile families," defined as families that are formed when children are born of unmarried couples. In the first comprehensive, longitudinal study of such families, a disconcerting picture emerges. Among the findings contained in the journal's summary:

- At the time of their child's birth, most parents in fragile families are romantically involved and have high hopes that they will get married; most, however, are not able to establish stable unions or long-term co-parenting relationships.
- Both mothers and fathers in fragile families have low earnings capacities stemming from low-quality education and from physical, emotional and mental health problems.
- The capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers fall short of those of married fathers and differ in important ways by the kind of relationship the fathers have with their child's mother.
- Children who grow up in single-mother and cohabiting families fare worse than those born into married-couple households, although being raised by stable single or cohabiting parents seems to entail less risk than being raised by single or cohabiting parents when these family types are unstable.

- The costs of nonmarital births are high, both to children and parents in fragile families and to society as a whole; reducing births to unmarried parents should be policymakers' primary goal.

Naturally, the journal includes several suggestions for public policies intended to strengthen "fragile families," all of which call for expanded social programs to address the supposed root cause, identified as nonmarital childbearing. As you might expect, emphasis is on avoiding childbirth over promoting marriage, as if a government in a free society could do either.

Sadly, I don't think there's a government program that will turn around our culture's shifting attitudes about marriage.

Unfortunately, perhaps due to our cultural distaste for doing hard things, negative attitudes are evident in our view of the institution itself. According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center, 39 percent of Americans now say marriage is obsolete.

More importantly, 34 percent of Americans said the growing variety of family living arrangements is good for society, while only 32 percent said it didn't make a difference and just 29 percent said it was troubling.

Count me among the 29 percent.

The decline of traditional marriages and the families on which they are built is taking an economic, social and spiritual toll on our nation. Reigniting our culture's commitment to commitment - even one that is truly daunting - is the key to revitalizing our families and communities.

Nobody said marriage was easy. But in every way you can measure what is good for people and society, it's worth the effort.

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