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# Cohabitation Is a Shaky Foundation



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Judging by the relationship status of the current occupants of Gracie Mansion in New York City and the Governor's Mansion in New York, cohabitation is enjoying unprecedented acceptance among American adults. Indeed, the number of cohabiting couples in the United States has grown 14-fold since 1970. Millions of adults seem to enjoy the freedom and flexibility that cohabitation affords them.

But cohabitation looks a lot less appealing from the vantage point of children who find themselves in a household headed by cohabiting parents. Children in cohabiting families are about twice as likely to drop out of high school, use drugs, or end up depressed, compared with children in intact, married families. They are also at least three times more likely to be physically, sexually or emotionally abused, according to [a recent federal report](#).

Yet today, more than 40 percent of American children will spend some time in a cohabiting household — either by birth or because one of their parents moved in with a new partner — more than will see their parents divorce. These trends led a group of 18 family scholars, led by me, to conclude that “the rise of cohabiting households with children is the largest unrecognized threat to the quality and stability of children’s family lives,” outpacing even divorce as a risk to the well-being of today’s children.

Why is cohabitation so risky to children? Compared with marriage, cohabitation furnishes less commitment, stability, sexual fidelity, and safety to romantic partners and their children. Consequently, cohabiting couples are more than twice

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*Cohabitation is harmful because it does not institutionalize commitment in a way that is easily understood and honored by romantic partners and their friends and family.*

as likely to break up and four times more likely to be unfaithful to one another, compared with married couples. All this has obvious implications for children in these homes.

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W. Bradford Wilcox on why marriage matters.

But is cohabitation really the problem, or some deeper factor — like poverty or relationship troubles that predated the cohabitation? The truth is that these other factors account for some of cohabitation's negative impact but the best studies suggest that cohabitation also has an independent negative effect, precisely because it does not institutionalize commitment in a way that is easily understood and honored by romantic partners and their friends and family.

Anyone who disagrees should answer this question: When was the last time you saw a cohabiting couple enter their relationship by vowing, in front of their closest friends and family, to love and cherish one another, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do they part?

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