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# ***A Review of the Research and Its Practical Application on Relationship Formation and Security of Commitment***

Presented by John Van Epp, Ph.D.  
July 9, 2020



ADMINISTRATION FOR  
**CHILDREN & FAMILIES**

**FYSB** Family & Youth  
Services Bureau

Adolescent Pregnancy  
Prevention Program



# Moderator

**Connie Huber, MPH, Ph.D.**

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## Presenter



**John Van Epp, Ph.D.**, president and founder of Love Thinks, LLC, is the author of “How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk (or Jerkette)” and his book for couples, “Becoming Better Together: Healthy Relationship Goals for Growing Together When the World is Pulling You Apart.”

He has experience with extensive research in premarital, marital, and family relations and as a clinical counselor for 25 years in his private counseling practice.

He has developed research-informed and evidence-based relationship programs that have been taught by more than 10,000 certified instructors to more than 1 million participants in every branch of the military, social agencies, marriage and family non-profits and coalitions, high schools, universities, faith-based organizations, and in all 50 states and 11 countries.

**“One of our biggest challenges with  
parents is not their parenting...  
it is their partnering.”**



# Objectives

**At the end of this webinar participants will be able to:**

- Explain the success sequence and the underlying research
- List predictors of successful marriages and the implications for sexual risk avoidance education
- Identify the skills that help minimize sexual risk and increase successful healthy relationship and marriage outcomes

# Three Trends in Relationship Formation

1. **Baby first, marriage later**
2. Cohabitation as a “risk-free” step in a relationship
3. Undefined and ambiguous commitments

# The Trend of Baby First, Marriage Later

Princeton University and Columbia University conducted the joint Fragile Families Study that followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000.

In-depth interviews and assessments were conducted with mothers, fathers, and each child beginning soon after the birth of the child and again when the child was 1, 3, 5, and 9 years old.

# The Trend of Baby First, Marriage Later

40%

**2008 Babies  
born to  
unmarried  
moms**

70%

**What unwed moms  
said were their  
chances of marrying  
the baby's father**

82%

**What unwed dads  
said were their  
chances of marrying  
the baby's mother**

16%

**The number  
who actually  
married the  
father**

70%

**How many of the  
couples were not  
even together  
anymore**

**In contrast, those who marry first and then had a baby are five times less likely to break up than those who had a baby first.**



## **Unmarried parents are much more disadvantaged than married parents. Compared to married parents, unmarried parents are:**

- More likely to have started parenting in their teens
- Less likely to have lived with both biological parents growing up
- More likely to have had children with other partners
- More likely to be poor
- More likely to suffer from depression
- More likely to report substance abuse
- More likely to have spent time in jail
- Disproportionately African American and Hispanic

# The Great Crossover for Middle America

- Around 2010, the crossover happened for Middle American women when the median age at which their marriages occurred became greater than the median age at which their first birth occurred.
- **40% of all first births in the U.S. are to unwed women**
- **58% of “Middle American” women have first birth unwed**
- Many of these women were cohabiting at the time of birth but nearly 40% had split up by the time their child was 5 (Three times higher breakup rates than those who were married).

## Millennial Parents: (Ages 22-39)

- Approximately 19 million Millennial Moms
- Around 9,000 babies born to Millennials each day
- Average age at motherhood is 26 years old
- Born between 1981 and 1994, Millennials are parents to 50% of today's children
- More than 1 million Millennial women become new mothers each year
- Millennials make a significant contribution to the \$1 trillion U.S. parents spend annually on raising their children



## Millennial Parents: (Ages 22-39)

- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort, shows that by the time the cohort reached ages 26-31 in 2011, **57% of births had occurred outside of marriage for both men and women.**
- In addition, 81% of births reported by women and 87% of births reported by men had occurred to non-college graduates.
- **And for those without four-year college degrees, 74% of births occurred outside of marriage among women.**



# WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?

About 30% of **all** U.S. children will see **at least two live-in partners** with their moms by the time they are 15.

— Andrew Cherlin  
Sociologist

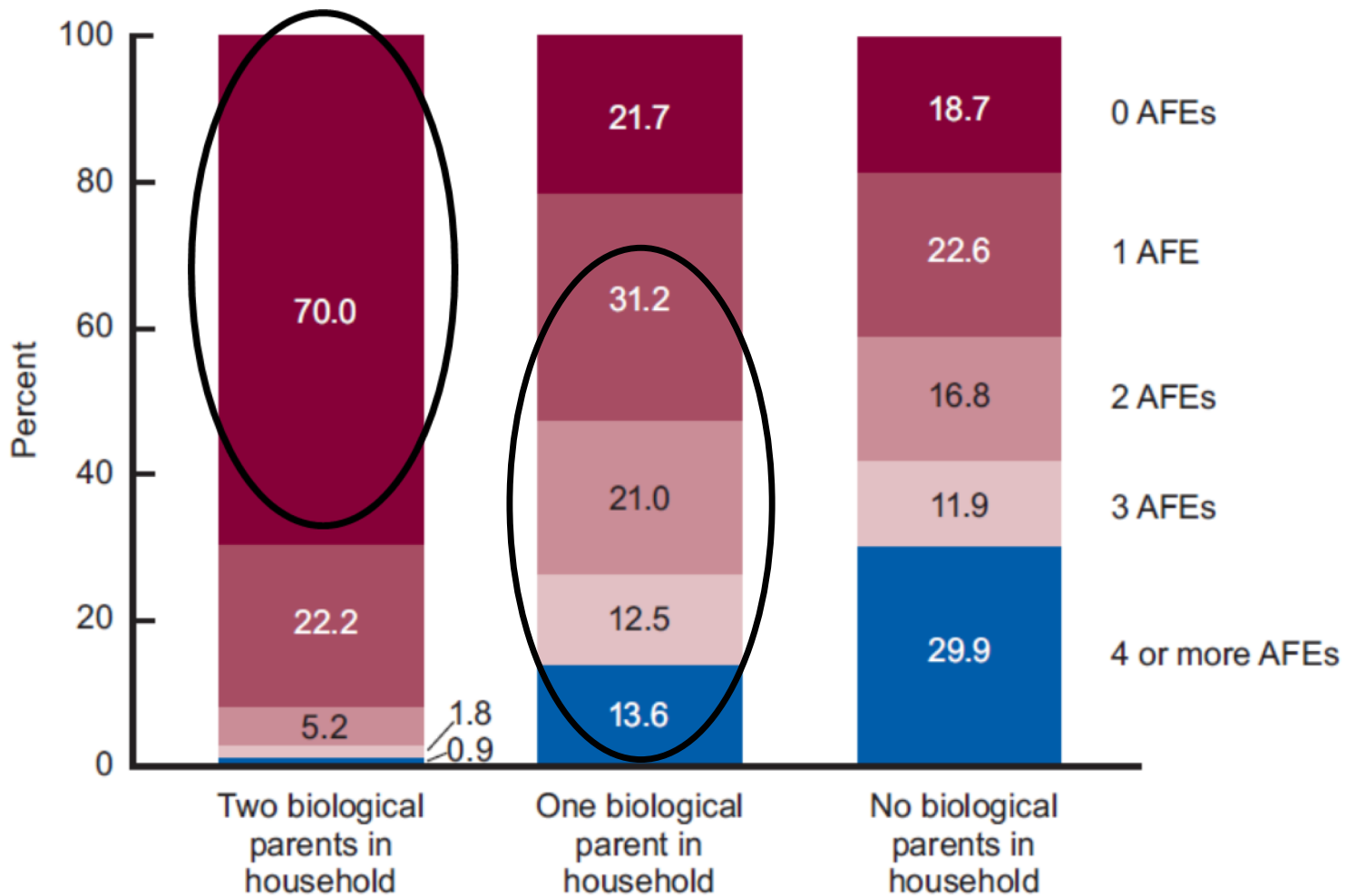
# The Kids Aren't All Right

## Greater risk of:

- Lower academic performance
- Negative emotional impact
- Being poor
- Abuse



# The Kids Aren't All Right



NOTES: Children living with step or adoptive parents were excluded. AFE is adverse family experience.  
SOURCE: CDC/NCHS, State and Local Area Integrated Telephone Survey, National Survey of Children's Health, 2011–2012.

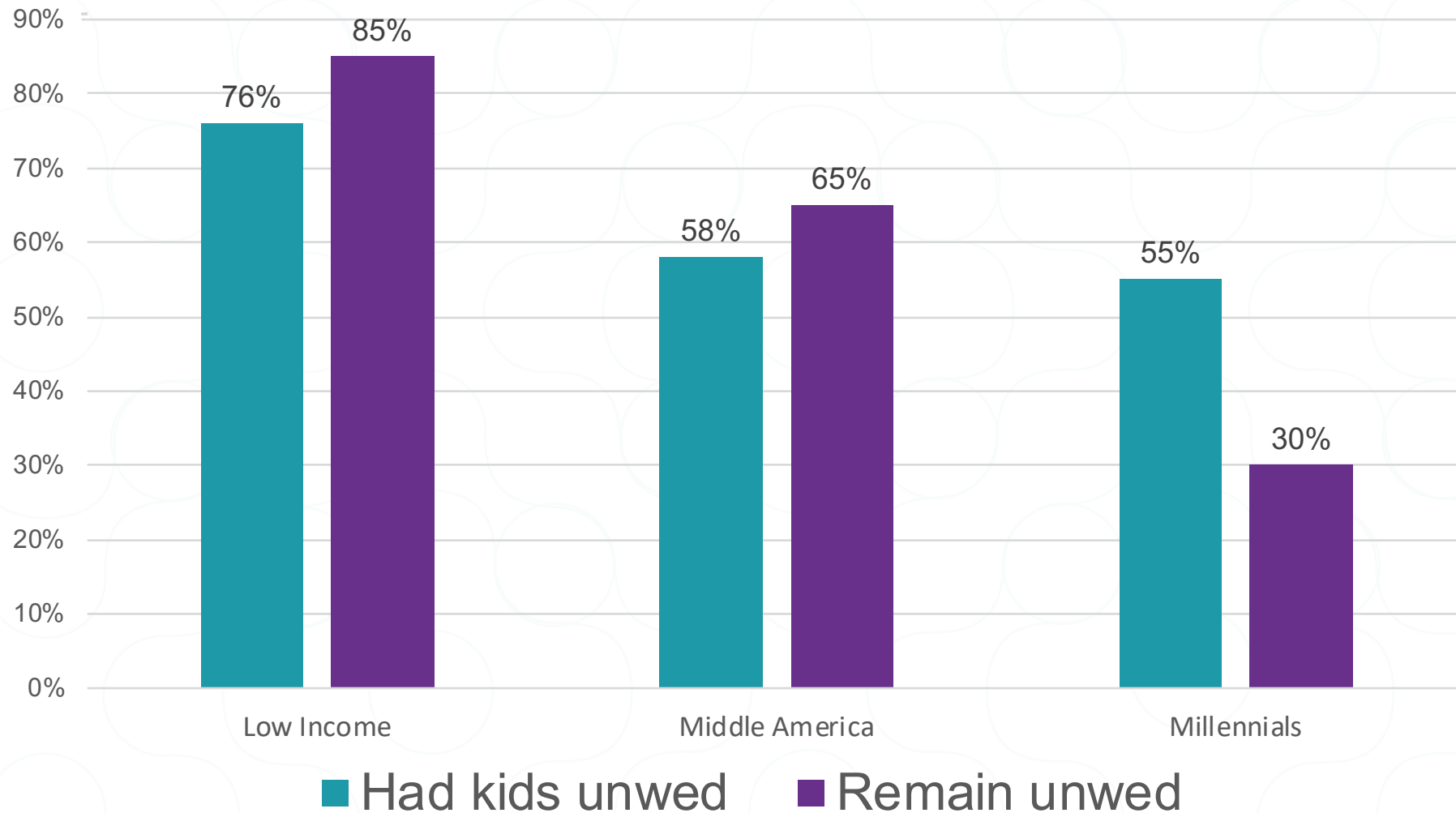
# The Next Generation of Marriages is At Risk

The next generation of singles have inherent risks for lower marital quality and higher marital instability because of the increased risk factors from their upbringing with unmarried parents and their multiple live-in partners, along with the economic, educational and psychological risks associated with these family constellations.



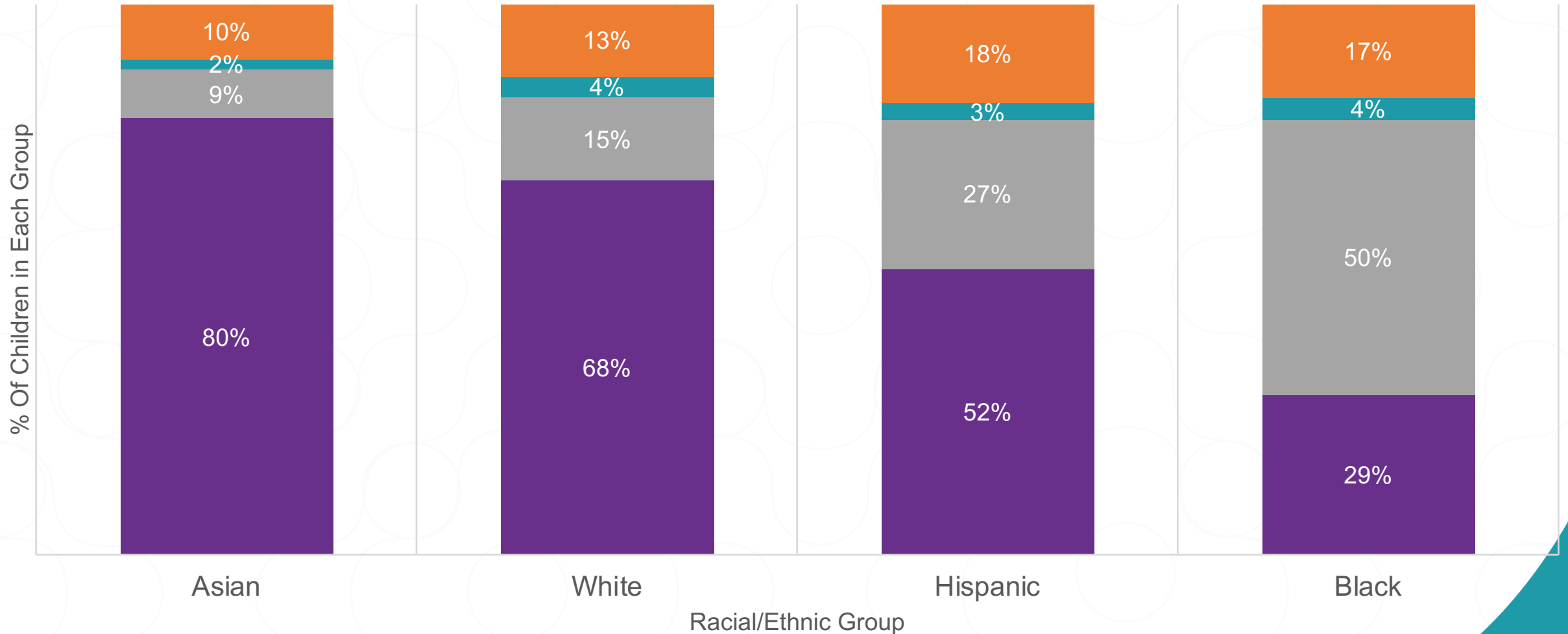
# Income Brackets and Sequencing

The United States now has the largest percentage of single parent households in the world.

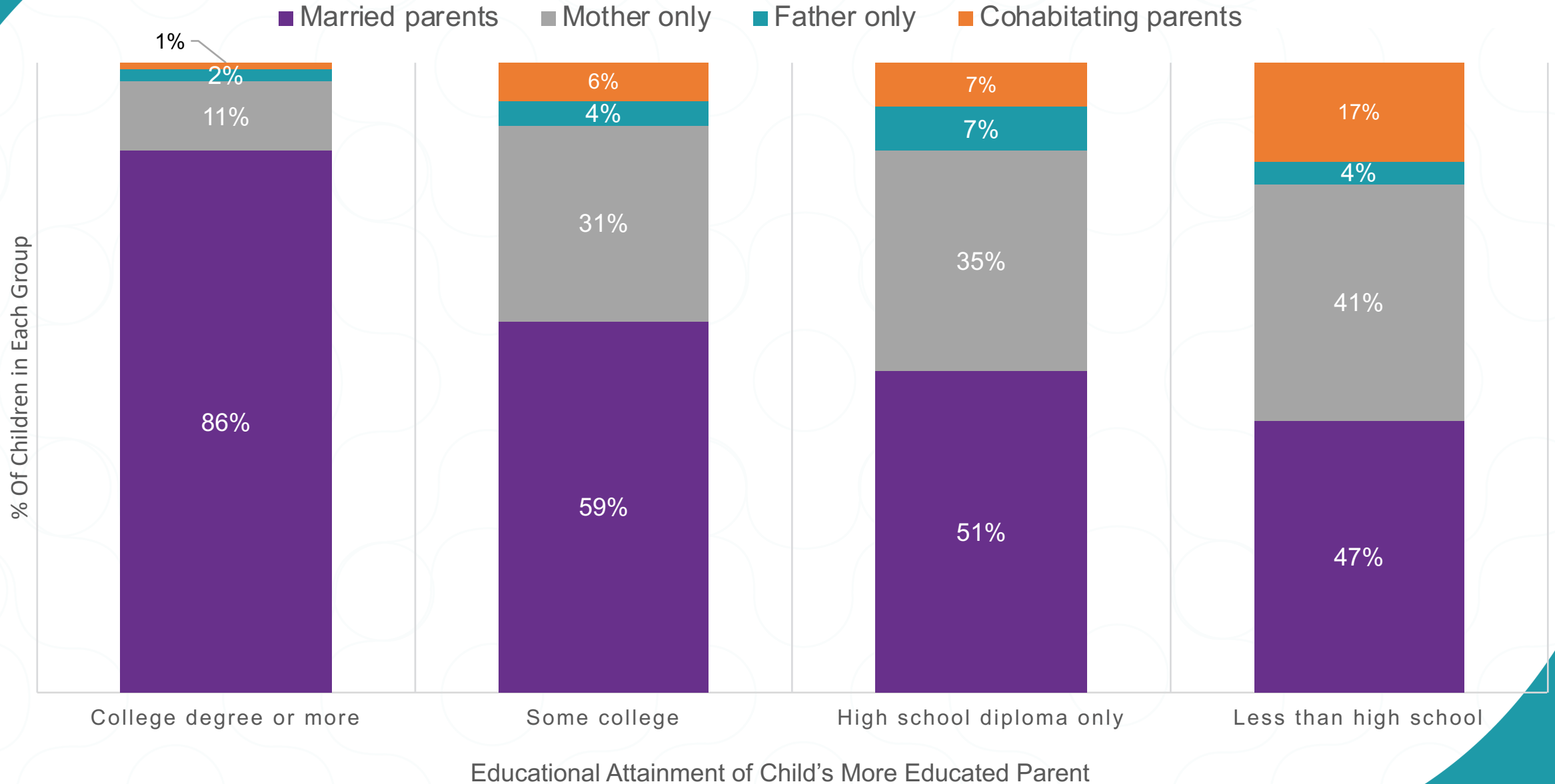


# Family Living Arrangements of U.S. Children for Four Racial/Ethnic Groups, 2014

■ Married birth parents ■ Birth mother only ■ Birth father only ■ Other



# Family Living Arrangements of U.S. Children by Parents' Education Level, 2014



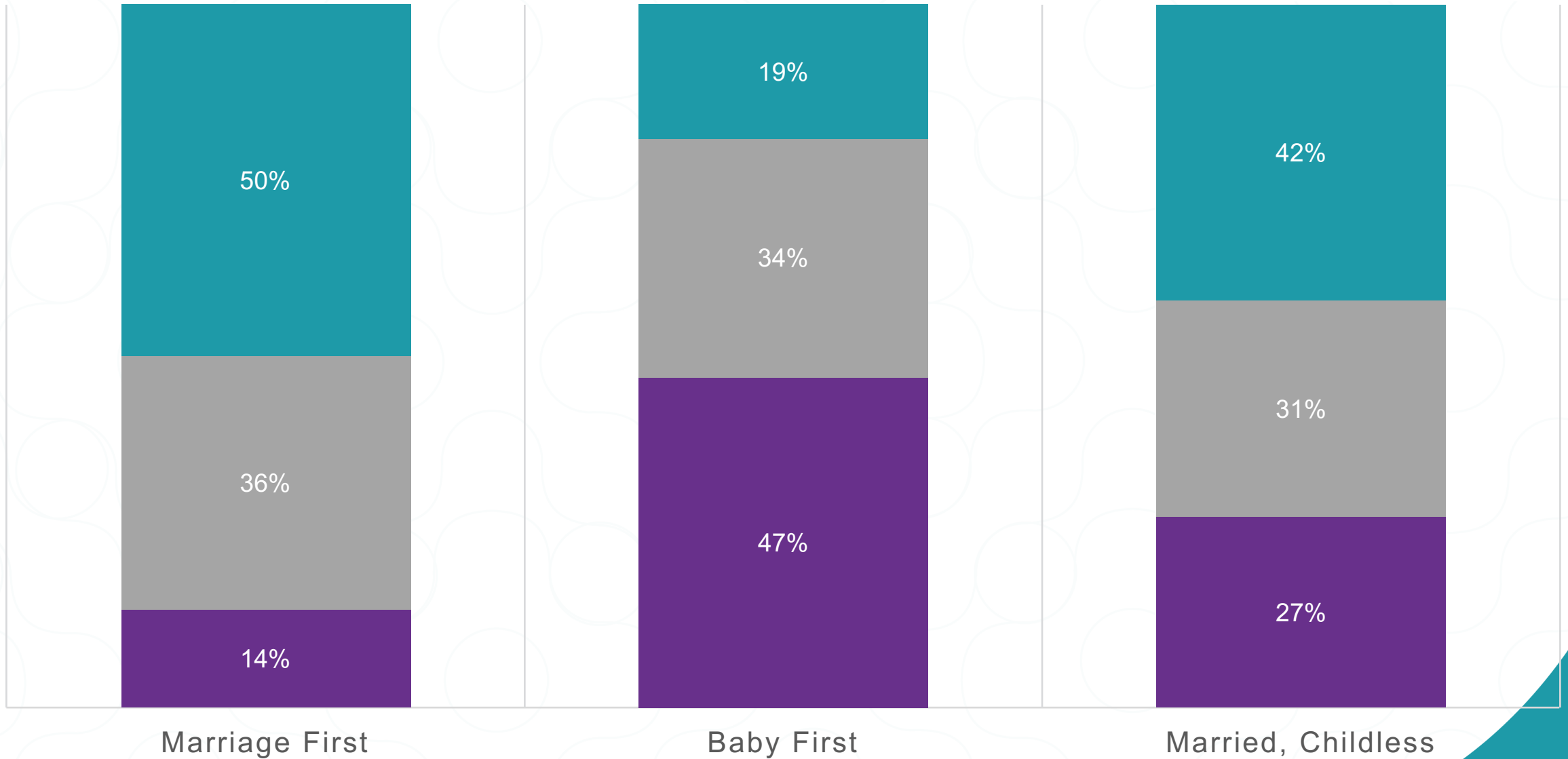
# Income Brackets and Sequencing

- 97% are not poor but are in the middle to higher income bracket
  - Millennials who get at least a high school degree, work, and then marry before kids.
- 86% are in the middle to higher income bracket when married before baby
  - Millennials who married first and then had baby and are in the middle to higher income brackets.
- 71% moved up in terms of income when they married before having baby
  - Millennials who grew up in the bottom third of the income distribution and married before having a baby have moved up to the middle or upper third of the distribution as young adults.



# % Of Adults 28-34 in Each Income Bracket

■ Lower income ■ Middle income ■ Higher income



## The Trend of Viewing Cohabitation as a “Risk-Free” Step in a Relationship

1. Baby first, marriage later
2. **Cohabitation as a “risk-free” step in a relationship**
3. Undefined and ambiguous commitments

## The Trend of Viewing Cohabitation as a “Risk-Free” Step in a Relationship

Living together **outside of marriage** has been researched for more than 35 years.

The conclusion is that:

- Cohabitation relationships break up much more frequently than marriages.
- Most marriages in which partners had previously cohabited have much higher divorce rates and lower satisfaction.
- Cohabiting is more entrapping than dating,

## The Trend of Viewing Cohabitation as a “Risk-Free” Step in a Relationship

- Cohabiting young has higher divorce rates, just like marrying young.
- Cohabiting raises the risk of unplanned pregnancies.
- The breakup effects of cohabitation have many of the effects of divorce.
- Most people enter marriage with a defined commitment, but that often is not the case with cohabitation.

## Research Summary on Meta-Analysis on Marriage and Cohabitation

- 973 research articles on the topics of marriage and cohabitation from early 1900s to present
  - 304 articles appeared only in PsycInfo,
  - 399 articles appeared only in SocIndex,
  - and 270 articles appeared in both databases, p. 108
- The analysis confirmed that those who cohabit have lower ratings of marital satisfaction and higher ratings of divorce than those who never cohabited before marriage.<sup>1</sup>

## Research Summary on Meta-Analysis on Marriage and Cohabitation

- “When cohabitation is conceptualized as a step in the mate selection process, it is associated with negative marital outcomes.” — p. 112
- “The major practical implication of this review is psychologists can inform the public that, despite popular belief, premarital cohabitation is generally associated with negative outcomes both in terms of marital quality and marital stability in the United States.” — p. 113





## **Cohabitation relationships break up much more frequently than marriages.**

Cohabiting couples had a separation rate five times that of married couples and a reconciliation rate that was one-third that of married couples.<sup>2</sup>

## Most marriages in which partners had previously cohabited have much *higher* divorce rates and *lower* satisfaction.

- The only cohabiting cohort that does not have a statistically significant difference in divorce rates from those who did not live together prior to marriage with their spouse or anyone else are those who are already engaged to be married.
- It seems that the closer cohabitation comes to be like marriage, the better the outcomes. This begs the question, does this finding support cohabitation outside of marriage, or does it support the institution of marriage?<sup>3</sup>

## **Cohabiting is more entrapping than dating.**

- It is harder to break up when you are living together than when you are apart because of the complications of a shared life.
- In addition, the aspects of commitment that are most strongly associated with happy, strong relationships actually decrease the longer a couple cohabits.<sup>4</sup>

## **Cohabiting young (15-22) has higher divorce rates, just like marrying young.**

- Just like marrying at a younger age, moving in together at a younger age (15-22) is associated with increased risks for divorce.
- However, the divorce rate for couples older than 22 who cohabit is still higher than the divorce rate of those who marry without ever cohabiting.<sup>5</sup>

## **Cohabiting raises the risk of unplanned pregnancy.**

- According to the National Center for Health Statistics, half of all births to cohabiting women are unintended, compared with only 25% of all births to married women.
- The number of births overall to cohabiting women continues to increase, from 14% of all births in 2002 to 25% in 2015, according to the National Survey of Family Growth.<sup>6</sup>

## The breakup effects of cohabitation have many of the effects of divorce.

- Cohabiting with more than just the person you end up marrying is associated with lowered relationship quality in marriage and a significantly higher divorce rate.
- The number of cohabiting unions that do not end in marriage keeps increasing.
- When a cohabiting relationship ends, **the effects of the break up extend beyond that of just a dating relationship.**
- In many ways, cohabitation is practicing marriage, and **breaking up is practicing divorce.**
- This idea can account for why those who cohabit with just one partner other than who they marry, have similar divorce rates as those who are in second marriages (around a 67% divorce rate, 15-20% higher than first-time marriages).<sup>7</sup>



## **Lower commitment levels continue from cohabitation into marriage with less marital quality.**

- Couples increasingly are cohabiting with less defined commitment (before any clear decisions have been made about a long-term commitment or future marriage).
- If they marry, these couples report significantly less commitment five and 10 years into marriage, lower marital satisfaction, and higher divorce rates than marrieds who did not premaritally cohabit.
- If their original reason for moving in together was to test their relationship, they actually report much higher rates than other couples who cohabit of negative communication, physical aggression, insecurity, depression, and anxiety once married.<sup>8</sup>

## The Trend of undefined and ambiguous commitments

1. Baby first, marriage later
2. Cohabitation as a “risk-free” step in a relationship
3. **Undefined and ambiguous commitments**

# Trend of Undefined Commitments and Ambiguity in Dating

DTR... Define The Relationship  
Personal Rationales for Why to Avoid?

## Personal Rationales for Why to Avoid?

- **Anxiety about Rejection:** Find out or face that they are not that into you. Fear of getting HURT!
- **Anxiety about Break Up:** The negotiation about the relationship makes one feel pressured, so it leads to one leaving or having to confront the other to leave (ultimatums)... The present arrangement is better than none... so I will just wait.
- **False Belief:** “Commitment just develops NATURALLY so don’t force anything!” This is not true.

# Personal Rationales for Why to Avoid?

- **Powerlessness:** The one who is committed the least, who cares the *least*, who loves the least, also has the MOST power.
- **Too soon:** The talk makes me look desperate, weak and/or needy. I feel embarrassed or guilty about initiating “the talk.”

**Where did this ambiguity  
trend come from?**



# Marriage has become blamed for divorce

## Abstract:

- Assessed national, longitudinal data from two generations to identify explanations for the intergenerational transmission of marital instability, one based on relationship skills and the other based on marital commitment.
- Study subjects were 2,033 married persons contacted in 1980, 1983, 1992, and 1997 and a sample of 335 offspring (aged 19 and older).
- **Parental divorce approximately doubled the odds that offspring would see their own marriages end in divorce.**
- Offspring with maritally distressed parents who remained continuously married did NOT have an elevated risk of divorce.
- **Divorce was most likely to be transmitted across generations if parents reported a low, rather than a high, level of discord prior to marital dissolution.**
- These results, combined with other findings from the study, suggest that **offspring with divorced parents have an elevated risk of seeing their own marriages end in divorce because they hold a comparatively weak commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage.**<sup>9</sup>

# Negative attitudes toward divorce are contagious

## Abstract:

- The purpose of this article is to review selected research published from 1984 to 2008 that focuses on what influences the attitudes of people in the United States toward marriage and critiques what is known about how attitudes toward marriage are affected by a variety of factors.
- A review of 14 studies revealed that research questions were limited in terms of scope. Theoretical guidance has been minimal, with only five of the 14 studies incorporating theoretical or conceptual frameworks.
- Despite these limitations, the findings of the 14 studies showed that offspring's attitudes toward marriage is highly dependent on the parental/family environment: Those whose parents were having conflicts, were divorced, and were having post-divorce interparental conflict expressed negative attitudes toward marriage.<sup>10</sup>

**What are the most common relationship-formation pathways you see in the populations you serve, and the challenges you face with addressing these trends?**

# Research Studies

## Study 1: Couples

- In a study of couples, sooner sex in their relationship led to more frequent cohabitation and lower satisfaction in the relationship.<sup>11</sup>

# Research Studies

## Study 2: Couples

- In a study with couples, the timing of a couple's first act of sex affected the quality of their future marriage relationship. Delaying sexual involvement allowed for more time to build communication, trust, and intimacy.<sup>12</sup>

# Research Studies

## Study 3: Women

- In a landmark study with women, the number of sexual partners before marriage increased the likelihood of divorce in a future marriage, and those who had no sexual partners before marriage had three times lower divorce rates.<sup>13</sup>



# Research Studies

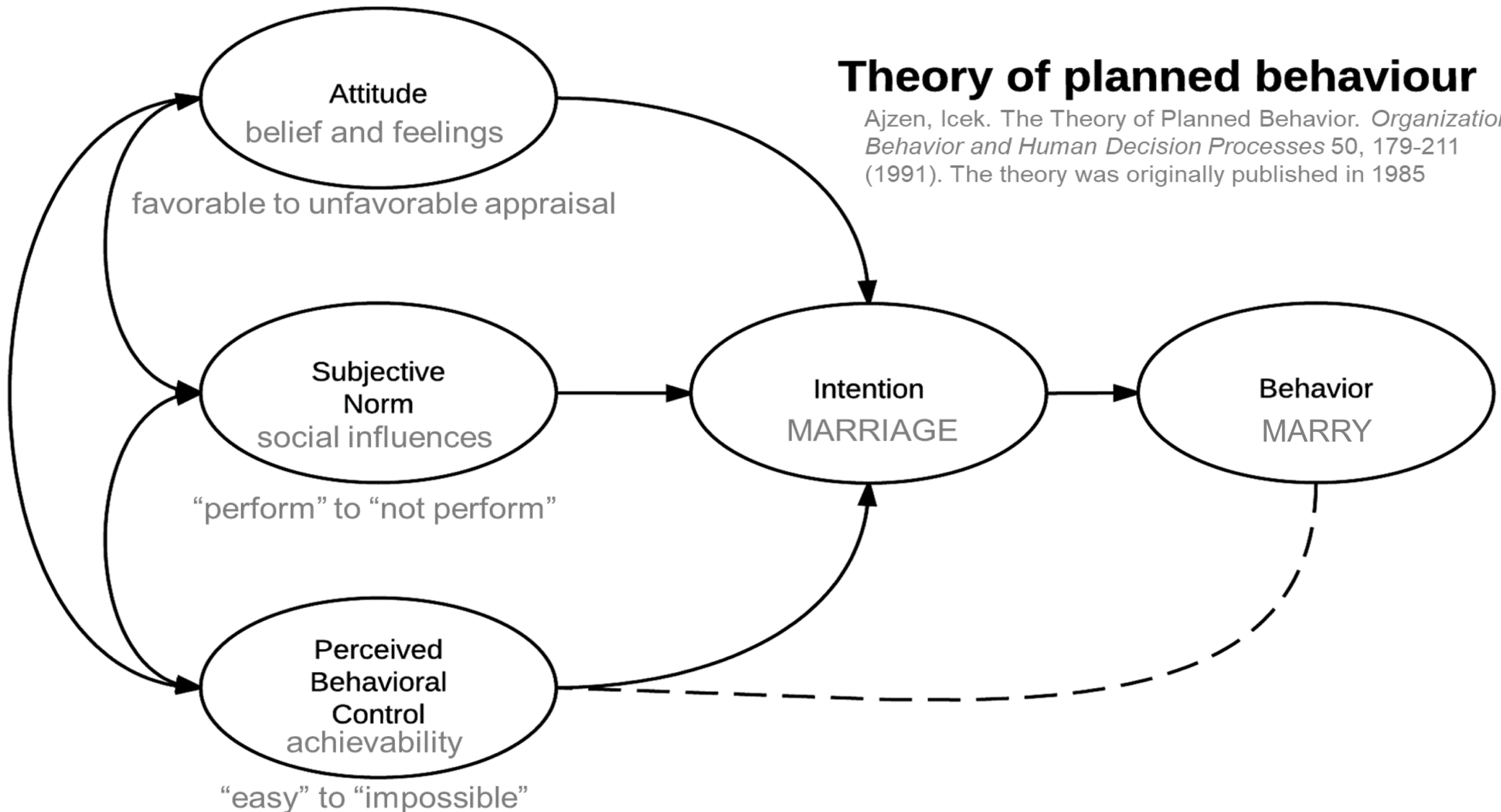
## Study 4: Men

- In a study of men from four countries, the number of sexual partners before marriage increased the likelihood that they would cheat in their marriages.<sup>14</sup>

**What are the topic areas that predict positive marriage outcomes that need to be included or more emphasized in relationship programs?**

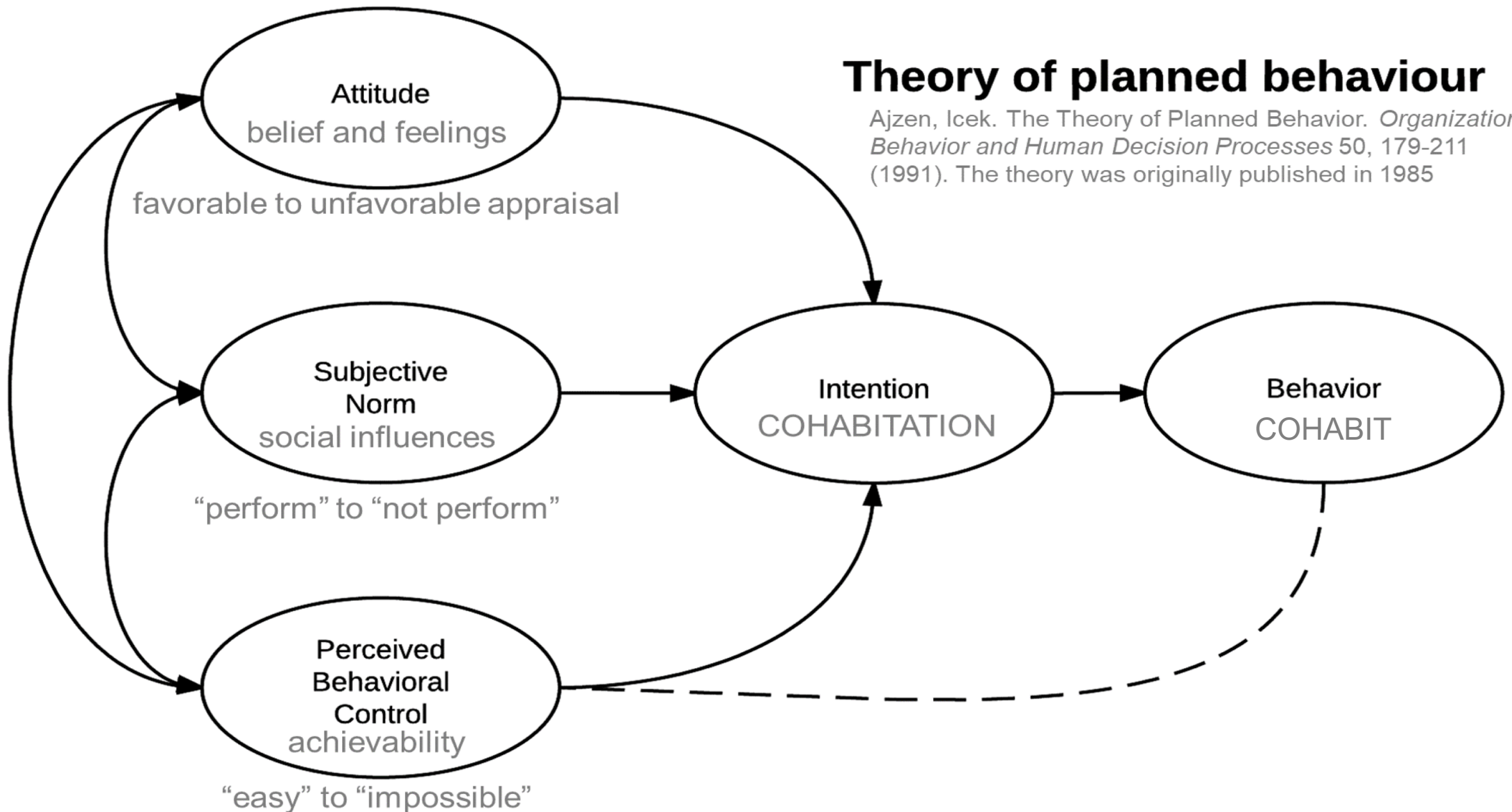
# Theory of planned behaviour

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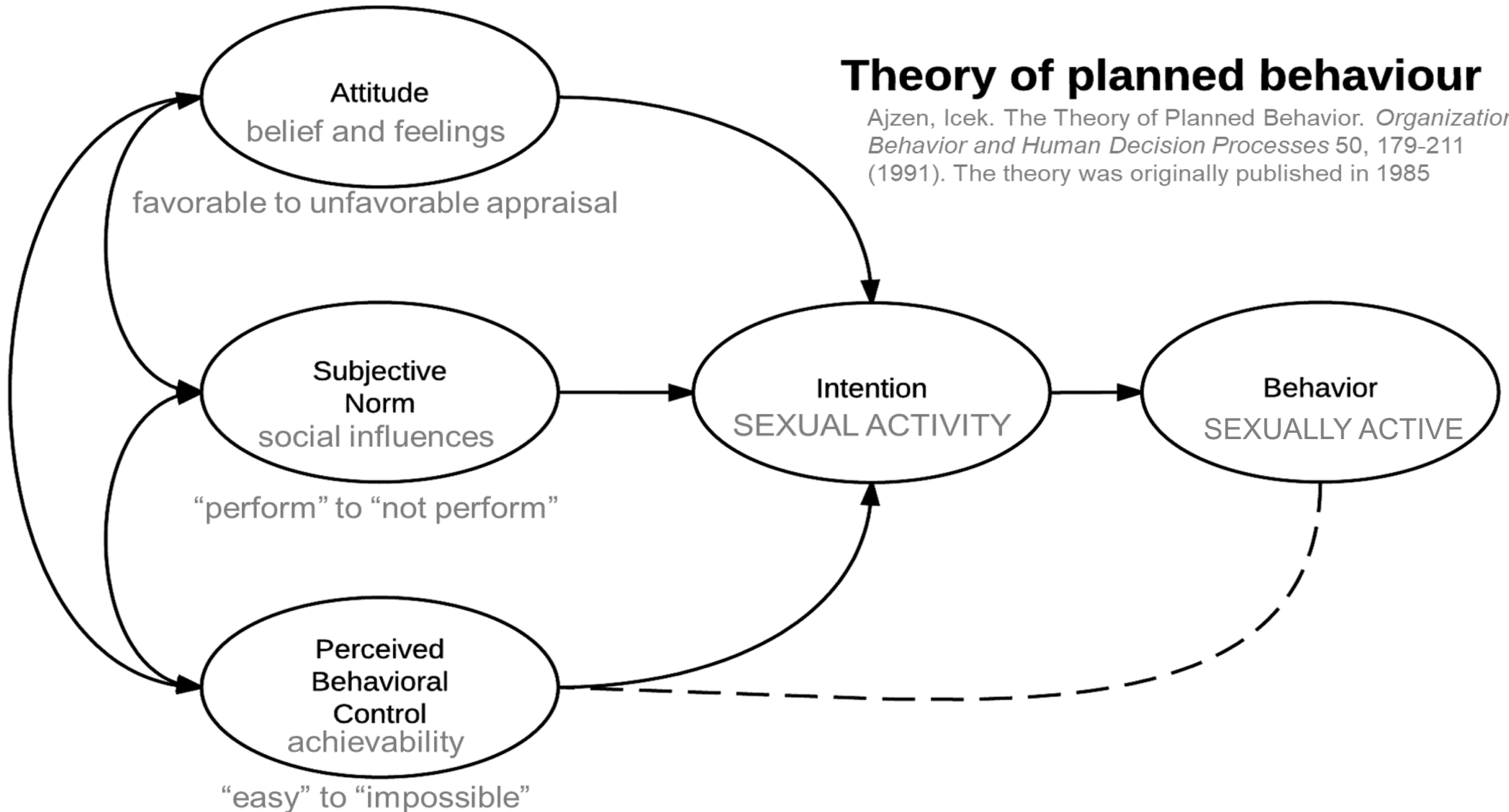
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**What specific personal or relational skills need to be developed that will enhance future marital success?**

**What specific changes or adaptations  
will better align your educational  
programs with this body of research?**



**QUESTIONS**



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Sexual Risk Avoidance Education  
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# Additional Resources

Healthy Marriage and Relationship Grants from ACF:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/healthy-marriage>

National Conference for Relationship Education Programs and Grantees:

<http://www.narme.org/>

Selected Resources for Premarital Predictors of Marital/Relational Outcomes:

Research summary: *Before I Do* <http://before-i-do.org>

Books: *How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk*, Van Epp, John

*Premarital Sex in America*, Regnerus, Mark and Uecker, Jeremy

*Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage and Monogamy*,  
Regnerus, Mark