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Webinar Transcript:

SRAE: A Review of the Research and Its Practical Application on Relationship Formation and Security of Commitment

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Connie: Thank you, Megan and welcome everyone to today's webinar on relationship formation and security of commitment. It is my pleasure to introduce Dr. John Van Epp, who was the president and founder of Love Thinks, and is an author and developer of evidence-based PICK Programs that has been taught to over 100,000 students in a high school setting.

For over 25 years, Dr. Van Epp and his programs have emphasized the importance of healthy relationship formation, with his Relationship Attachment Model or RAM for short. In this webinar, he will organize a vast amount of research on the topic of relationship formation in a very understandable and practical way. It's my pleasure to introduce Dr. Van Epp for this webinar. He is no stranger to our home as we've had a copy of his bestselling book, "How Not to Marry a Jerk or Jerkette", that has been on the shelves in our home since 2007. And it is my pleasure now to call him friend and to introduce him at this time, thank you, John.

John: We have to really have a good time together and also to really learn together. So I wanted to start with a statement that I've made for years about parenting, but it kind of brings a connection to another topic, which is going to be the topic of this webinar. And I just say it like this, one of the biggest challenges with parents is not their parenting, it's their partnering. And we're going to see this all through, that as the partnering goes, for many people, so goes the parenting and the is a little bit of the so what?

Of everything that we're going to talk about in terms of relationship formation, because relationship formation is not just about the two partners, it is also the union that forms the framework for the next generation and that framework becomes extremely important. So as the partnering goes, so goes the parenting. All right, make sure my computer's working good with all of you. You know, at the end of this webinar, some of the things that we want you to be able to explain is really the importance, and in an understandable way, kind of the successful approach to forming relationships.

A second is some areas of premarital or non-marital sexual activity, and how that actually carries over into a predictive way of how relationships last, both quality and stability in marriage. So what are some of the, particularly, the sexual predictors of marriage outcomes? And then finally, we're going to be talking about some skills that



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really help minimize sexual risk and actually increase successful, healthy relationship and marriage outcomes. So, just maybe to define a couple things, what is a relationship skill, for example? Well, if you think of the activities that we do within a relationship, so what do we do? We talk, we recreate, we build some kind of emotional intimacy, we have problems that we solve, we have conflicts that we have to resolve, these are activities that are done in a relationship.

A scale is simply the measure of proficiency. It's like taking some activity and saying let's talk about both the within and the between, you might call it, how people inside of them, and between them and another, what's involved in doing this with great proficiency or excellence, this activity? So the measure of excellence, and what goes into doing an activity in a very successful way, becomes what we oftentimes call relationship skill.

A skill, by the way, is a little different than when we're talking about relationship formation. This is about how to develop a relationship. So, in Love Thinks, we oftentimes talk about two major areas of relationship management, we talk about the development or formation of a new relationship, and the maintenance of an going long-term relationship and there's some different things that apply to both.

We're going to be focusing in this webinar on the first of the two, what does it mean to develop a healthy relationship? Or what is the sequence of how we go about forming a relationship and from the beginning to the, you might say, the maturity of it in a way that ultimately leads to best outcome. So obviously, we have a more narrow focus, we're looking at romantic relationships, not just all relationships in general. So the formation of romantic relationships, and some of the outcomes that we're looking at in particular have to do with marital quality and stability.

So just so you know, in research, quality usually refers to lots of areas of marriage satisfaction, the intimacy, the emotional closeness, sexual satisfaction, these are measures of quality, stability oftentimes, has to do with the longevity of a relationship, like did it end in divorce? Did it end in some kind of separation? Was it a very stable fulfilling relationship?

So there are studies that actually look at what are the qualities of the most satisfying, fulfilling marriage relationships rather than just what are the qualities that lead to some kind of dysfunction or ultimately divorce? So we're going to be looking at, you know, when I talk about this third area skills that help to minimize sexual risk and increase healthy relationship formation, we're going to be talking about how relationships can be



formed in ways that actually have ultimately, the greatest likelihood of success in a long-term marriage.

There are three trends that we're going to start with. So you might also say, I kind of loaded the front end of this webinar with a lot of information before we actually get to one of our, kind of, short breakout discussion times. So we have three major breakup discussion times and then we close with some question and answer time as well. But before we get to the first one, I really loaded the seminar or this webinar with I think a lot of information by going through three major trends.

Baby first, marriage later is going to be the first trend we look at, cohabitation as a risk-free step in a relationship, and we'll talk about that, and then the third is undefined and ambiguous commitments and the trend that has led to that. So baby first, marriage later, this has been a trend that has been growing quite a bit. So I want to start this trend with a review of a study that I find really fascinating. It was done in conjunction with Princeton University and Columbia University. It was called the Fragile Families Study. Now, they followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 children. These were firstborn children from 20, I think it was 20 different major U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000.

So they conducted in depth interviews. It started with right when the baby was born, they interviewed both the mother and the father of the baby, as well as this kind of assessment of the child. Now they did follow ups, so this is a longitudinal study, they did follow ups at year three, five, nine, great pointer first year, third year, fifth year in ninth year. Yeah, there you go. So it was just shy of a 10 year longitudinal study on families and the firstborn child.

So, I'm going to give you and kind of explain this next finding. So before I do, let me just say, in general, when they first met with the parents right when the baby was born, and then the other four subsequent times, the year one, when the baby turned one years old, three years old, five years old, and the nine, but when they first went met with the parents, at the birth of the child, about 60% of the parents were married, so they were married prior to the birth of the child, that means 40% were unmarried.

So I'm going to take this study and zero in on, zoom in on the 40% that were unmarried. They asked them a very interesting question. They asked the mothers of the baby, how many of you plan on marrying the father of your child? Around 70% of the moms said they were going to marry the father. So we don't really have any time to dialogue about this, but I just want you to answer this question in your own mind when they turn to the fathers, and they said, "How many of you," you know, they asked these questions, obviously not in front of both parents, they asked them individually. So they asked the fathers, how many of you plan on marrying the mother of the child? 70% of the moms



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said they're going to get married to the biological father, what percentage, higher or lower? Answer it in your mind, of fathers.

If you said lower, you were wrong. 82% of the fathers said they were going to marry the mother. Now I'm going to show you this next slide. So 40% babies born to unmarried moms, I'm starting at the left, 70% of the moms said they wanted to marry the father at the birth of the child, 82% At year five, only 16% had actually married the father. And 70%, it wasn't 70% that got married, 70% were not together and moved on to a new partner.

What I want you to see is how fragile this kind of cohabitation relationship or this kind of unmarried relationship was. So we might want to check, I think we have somebody off mute. So you might want to check that, make sure everybody's on mute but this is what I want you to pay attention to. These are probably the most, you might say, the most secure relationships that are unmarried. They had 70 to 82% intentionality of getting married and they were sharing the birth of the firstborn child together.

These things you might say, really raise the likelihood that these are some of the most secure unmarried couples, as you can imagine, however, five years later, in that setting, only 16% get married, and 70% had already broke up. In contrast, if we go over to the 60%, that were married before the firstborn child, five times more likely, so 500% increase in the number of those that were still married, still together at age five years old of the child, or year five, compared to those that were unmarried.

This huge difference is something that we really need to consider, what are the ramifications of unmarried child birthing, and even though there's great intentionality to get married, even though the relationship seems to be a really secure one, there is something about the power of marriage that needs to be factored in to this whole area of successful relationship sequencing or formation.

So what do we know about these unmarried parents? Well, many times they're much more disadvantaged compared to married parents, so very often, they're likely to have started parenting in their teens, had children with other partners, for just if we talk about non-marital birth mothers, many times, these are the things that are true about them. But what I want you to pay attention because a lot of times we kind of dismiss this and say, "Oh, that's just a certain cohort out there." But I want you to see this trend is crossing cohorts.

In other words, it's becoming a mainstream trend, which should be very disconcerting to us. So, back about 10 years ago, there was something called The Great Crossover. So Middle America is not low income, this is Middle America, meaning they usually have



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graduated high school, many of them, they haven't graduated college, that's not a definition of Middle America, but many of them have had some college coursework or attended college to some extent, but this is Middle America women rather than low income women. And 40% of all first births in the U.S. are to unwed women, but if you just pull out of them, the middle America women, it's 58% and that Great Crossover was the first time in U.S. history that the majority of first time mothers were unmarried in Middle America.

If we talk about another cohort, the Millennials, we see a similar kind of trend happening, that first of all, Millennials would be basically, those in their 20s and 30s. So they really constitute the majority of those having babies, in fact about 9,000 babies are born to Millennials each day, and that means about a million Millennial women become mothers every year. So and the average age is not teenage years, it's 26 years old, so we're talking about "older Millennials" not young Millennials having children.

However, when we look at some longitudinal data, we found that 57% of the Millennials, Millennial women, in other words, were unmarried when they had their first child. So this percentage can change with each year because obviously if more married Millennials begin having children, then the percentage changes. But the point is, is that we have a generation, now a cohort generation, that also is following this same trend, this is not a low income trend anymore. And if we think about college education, we can see that 74% of the births occur outside of marriage among the Millennial women as well.

So these things become very important to consider. Why is this important? What's the so what? Well, I go back to what I said, there's a lot of concern about how kids grow up, because long before marriage, there are templates that are being developed in the children about what to expect and think of marriage. So, Andrew Cherlin, which many of you are familiar with, one of the most renowned sociologists of the 21st century, is saying about 30%, so about a third of children, by the time they reach age 15, they will see mom with at least two live-in partners. And we know that when you start seeing these types of family constellations, that the kids have much greater risks, lower academic performance, negative emotional impact, poverty, abuse.

So here's just you know, you're familiar with ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences, right? Well, if we talk about Adverse Family Experiences, AFE, then we're talking really about, if both biological parents are in the household, 70%, that's the bar on the left, have no, no, zero adverse family experiences, whereas if there's just one biological parent in the household, it's actually closer to 80%, actually have one or more. And so, if we don't have any biological parent, you can see it gets even much greater.



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So the point being, the kids are actually being greatly affected by the partnering process that is going on in the parents relationship. So this next generation is greatly at risk, so, for what? Well, these are things, all these things that we're talking about, when you start adding them up and looking at childhood upbringing and things, marital quality and marital instability, those two major measures of marriage outcomes, these are many times the risk factors that increase marital instability and lower marital quality.

So if we just talk about income brackets, so I'm going to talk about, kind of bring this into some economics for a minute. Well, if we just kind of summarize, what we said is, in terms of single parent households, might want to check the mute again for everybody, but if we look at single parent households, about 76% are having children, out of the low income, having children out of wedlock or in an unmarried state, and 85% of those stay unmarried.

And as I showed you, the vast majority that stay unmarried, stay unmarried because within a short amount of time, usually within five years, they have broke up and they've moved on to new partners. So this area of multiple partners, non-biological partners, and fragile unions is really very, very high, talking about 76%, so three out of four. In Middle America, though, it's still more than half and then in the Millennials, again, it's more than half. So these are just kind of a summary of what I've already shared. If we talk about a little bit of a racial breakdown, interestingly, we don't have a lot of data on the Indian, not Native American, but I'm talking about from India, but it's interesting that the highest income bracket per individual or household is among the Asians and they also have the highest percentage of married births.

And I think they are only higher, if I'm right, I'm pretty sure this is correct, so don't hold me to it, but I'm pretty sure Indian per capita is the highest, even higher than the Asian. And so it is not white that is the highest just so you know, it goes, I think it goes Indian, Asian and then white but there isn't a very interesting parallel because I think the stats on married births is even higher among the Indian women than the Asian women, but you can see as you start moving here, that what is happening is going to parallel the economics, and this is something that becomes really important, that relationship formation and economic position and mobility are highly correlated and there's some interesting evidence that relationship formation actually has some impact, significant impact, according to some studies on economics and economic mobility, which is what we're going to see next.

So, what are we talking about? Well, also, you can see college education follows a very similar kind of framework, so that comes in here as well. So 97%, so listen, let's think about Millennials for a minute, Millennials who get a high school education, so they get their degree, and they get a job, they get married and then they have kids. So if those



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four factors, which has often been called the success sequence, but if they do that in some kind of an order, meaning they have their high school education and a job, their marriage, and those three things exist before they have a child, 97% of them are not in the lowest income bracket of poverty, they're in the middle, so we're talking about thirds, first third would be the lowest, middle third, the middle America top third would be high income. But now watch this, let's take out everything but married.

So Millennials who just got married, and then had baby and are not in, so 86% of them are in the middle to higher income bracket. So we're talking only 14% of those Millennials are in that lower third. So let's talk about mobility, so Millennials, what about those who grew up in the bottom third? So here are the Millennials, let's pull out of this data, just those that grew up in the bottom third of the income distribution, but they got married first, and then had a baby, 71% of them, almost three out of four, move from the bottom third to either the middle or upper third.

So this idea of economic mobility is really highly related somehow to relationship formation. And it does seem that relationship formation is more of a driver of economic mobility than the reverse. So here, we just kind of have a quick summary of that, of what I just said. So I want to move on to cohabitation as a risk-free step in a relationship. So these three trends interact with each other and we'll try to pull it together before we, like I said, I'm kind of front end loaded with a lot of information and you will have access to these as we finish up, so these resources will be available to you.

Living together outside of marriage really is an extremely studied area, for 35 plus years. And these are just some of the summaries, but I'll go through them just one at a time, somewhat quickly, but there was a meta study that I found really, really interesting that looked at almost 1,000 research studies, so can you imagine, and I just want to pull out two quotes, because these quotes reminded me of back in the day when a pack of cigarettes had to have the Surgeon General's warning on them, which they still do, but do you remember kind of, like I'm old enough to remember when that was first coming about, and listen to these two quotes. Number one, "When cohabitation is conceptualized as a step in the mate selection process, it is associated with negative marital outcomes."

Now listen to this second quote. "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." So here we go again, we're talking about both quality and stability being negatively affected. So let me just, I'm going to be pulling from a lot of different research studies, there's a lot more that could be brought into this, but I've just tried to pick out the most salient ones, and I'm going to give you seven risks.

So just to kind of back up for a minute, I said that there's a trend that cohabitation is viewed as a risk-free step in a relationship. Now, I didn't say, it is now the step leading toward marriage, I think that maybe existed around the 1970s, maybe even into the 80s, that as a relationship developed two people were more committed, they said before we get married, we want to live together.

But living together has become much more diversified than that next step in a relationship formation. Now, it is a step that is done in lots of different settings for lots of different reasons. It could be just convenience, or we've been spending the weekend together, so why the heck, or economic reasons, you know why we both paying rent, let's just move in together, but the one common factor in all of these kinds of cohabitation settings or arrangements seems to be a generalized belief that moving in together is fairly risk-free to having any detrimental effects if it doesn't work out.

So if it doesn't work out, no foul, no worries but if it does work out, then that's great. So that's why I just wanted you to see that I've labeled it, this trend is now cohabitation as a risk-free step. So what I want to focus on are some of the clear research found risks. So the first one is that cohabitating relationships break up much more frequently than marriages. Actually five times more frequent cohabitating relationships break up.

And those reconciling, by the way, only one-third reconcile compared to married couples. Second is that in most marriages, where partners have previously cohabited, they have a lot higher of divorce rates and lower satisfaction rates. So there's only really one and this I find really interesting, so there are researchers and there is research studies that have basically tried to show non-significant differences between a cohabitating relationship that leads to marriage and a non-cohabitating relationship that leads to marriage.

So, hey, just cohabitating, so they haven't found any studies where cohabiting relationships produce better outcomes in marital stability and marriage quality. There have been just a handful of studies that found non-significant differences between those that lived together before marriage and those that don't live together before marriage, but this is something I want you to understand, the only studies that have found that non-significant difference have had highly restrictive, you might say, conditions for the people that live together, for example, they must be age 23 or older and have never lived with anybody prior, they must end up marrying the first and only person that they moved in with, and they must not have pregnancy before they marry and some studies, they must be engaged, so have a very high level of commitment.



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If you think about this, basically what they're finding is that a cohabiting relationship that is most similar to what traditionally has been the marriage relationship actually produces the best results. So it only makes sense to me, it's not really an a proof that cohabiting relationships are beneficial.

What it actually becomes a proof of is that marriage or a high level of secure commitment that two people have made together, and then they join their lives, move in, and then start having a family that, that kind of sequence has the best results in all the studies, and if we just take the non-marital relationship and try to get it as close to that as possible, then we start to get kind of similar results, which doesn't say that, that is better, or that is even a good idea necessarily, it's not really supportive of that, to me, it just seems to be saying it's supportive of marriage.

So it's interesting if you look at all that research. A couple more, a third risk is that cohabitation tends to trap two people. So just think of this, my younger daughter was dating a fella that was from our own hometown, but he had gotten a job in New York City, so they were dating long distance, from Ohio to New York. We lived in Ohio at the time. She was getting serious, wanted to make sure that they have some proximity, close proximity, so she was going to move in New York, well he lived in downtown New York City in Manhattan. If you think about it, what kind of expense is there for both of them to have their own places? They'd already been dating a couple years, why not move in together?

But I would want you to think of this. She chose not to move in with him, she got her own place, got her own job, she maintained her own independence and freedom. In what setting would it been harder for her to identify a problem, confront the problem in the relationship and ultimately break up with him? If she was independent with her own place, her own job or own residence, or if she was actually joined together and lived with him?

Can you see how living with him would create a blending of life and dependencies that heightened dependency, greater than the understanding of the relationship and the judgment, and the security of the relationship and the dependency factor would create somewhat of an entrapping situation. Research has found this and found that many of these couples just overlook issues because they form that dependency, end up getting married with lower quality and higher risks in their relationship because they weren't in a setting where they could really address the things more on the surface, more directly.

A couple other factors, risk number four, higher divorce rates. So we have more and more people marrying later, but more and more people moving in together younger, so we've kind of convinced people, don't get married in your teen years or even at age 20 or 21, wait a little bit, well, now that has gone to the far end of the 20s, almost into the



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30s, but we haven't really fixed the problem because now we have multiple cohabiting relationships on the front end of the 20s.

And cohabiting raises the risk of unplanned pregnancy, largely because cohabitation is an arrangement that has little planning involved at all. So it's an arrangement where two people are not forming a lot of plans. Something I think that is really interesting is that and this will be maybe our, I think I'm at risk number six, that the breakup effects of cohabitation in many ways have a lot of similarities to the breakup effects of divorce.

And we see this in some research where just a quick example is, if two people get married and then they get divorced, we've known for a long time, for really decades, that the second marriage actually has a higher risk of divorce than the average divorce rate of first marriages. So, it used to be, we'd say 50% average divorce rate of first marriages that's a little bit lower now, it's dropped but if we just kind of take that old number, the second number was around 67%, 68% for second marriages.

Interesting landmark study by Jay Teachman, where he looked at those that lived with somebody, it didn't work out, they broke up, and then they ended up getting married to somebody else, so that was their first marriage. So their risk, that group's risk of divorce should be somewhere around 50%, like the average, right? But he found it matched those that had already divorced. So even though they had no divorce in their history, they had a cohabitation divorce breakup, and it put them in the same kind of risk percentage as those that were getting into second marriages.

I think that leads us to believe that we minimize how impactful a cohabiting relationship that doesn't work out can really be on the two people, broken hearts, relationship baggage, multiple problems that come out of that, all of these things are highly minimized in the cultural trend. The last risk factor, we'll say is lower commitment levels continue from cohabitation and marriage with less marital quality. And this really leads me to the last trend and I'm going to do this one fairly quickly, but it's just, you can almost think of it as a progression that as we have moved away from marriage as the arrangement and we've moved into cohabitation, and as we have kind of freed up the sexual act to be just part of how we do relationships, romantic relationships, so that baby first, marriage later, cohabitation is risk-free, what happens in that whole process is that commitment becomes more, well, I might say less and less defined in relationships.

So relationships are confused, people don't really know where we are in this relationship, in terms of commitment. This used to be called and some still refer to it as DTR, let's have that relationship talk, let's sit out, where are we in this relationship? I can even remember in high school, so this is really going to date me but back in the



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'70s, if you liked a girl and you went out, you took her out a couple times, it wasn't very long before you had to have the relationship. Where are we in the relationship? Are we going together, is what we called it back then, that was a label for a certain degree of commitment.

This has always been true in relationships, but the trend from really the '70s until the 2020s, the trend is to have relationships that are kind of full blown romantic relationships, sexually involved, maybe even cohabiting, but with very little definition. Many, many couples have moved in together having never had the talk, because this is the trend, and you might say why, what is going on?

Well, there's a lot of anxiety. One of the things we know about the Millennial generation, which is also kind of fascinating, is that they have measures of the highest levels of anxiety of any generation even more than the generation that lived through the depression. And so it's really kind of interesting, and I think a lot of anxiety is all about relationship security, relationship formation, personal identity, and how personal identity gets molded into relationships. So there's anxiety about rejection, there's anxiety about breakups, there's anxieties really about being powerless.

Like, if I am really committed to you, doesn't that put me into your power? You have the power over me, so commitment starts to feel powerless. And I don't want to go there too soon, because it might result, and so if you look at these, there's kind of this false belief that commitment is just going to happen, it's just going to develop, so we don't need to do anything about this, it's just going to happen. And this anxiety, this concern, this sense of, well, if we don't talk about it, if we leave it undefined, then I am somewhat protected.

I think that's a general kind of movement that goes underneath, it's like an undercurrent. So the wave of not defining the relationship, of not talking about it is on the top, the undercurrent pulling them seems to be this angst about what commitment and defining a commitment might actually do to me and set me up for in terms of potential rejection. You say, where did all this come from? I think we could speculate lots of things. So I'm just going to give you a couple things before we take your questions in about two minutes or three minutes.

First of all, I really think, ever since the divorce rates started hitting 50%, somewhere in the '70s, more and more, that divorce rate, and the breakup of relationships in divorce, actually had to find a fall guy, had to have somebody to blame, and what got blamed is marriage. Marriage was the very source of this problem of divorce. And so, the attitude



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toward marriage started dropping more and more, and more, the beliefs, the confidence in marriage dropped more and more, and more and I think largely because, "Hey, I saw my parents get divorced." So in other words, people would say, not mine, mine didn't get divorce, but I think people would say, "Hey, I saw my parents get divorced, I can't believe in marriage anymore."

So these results have suggested from lots of studies, that the offspring of divorced parents actually have an elevated risk of seeing their own marriages end in divorce, but they also have this elevated anxiety about their marriage, and what the marriage commitment will be. We know that attitudes toward divorce are very contagious. An interesting study that looked at 1984 to 2008, and all of the studies of the attitudes, like what influences the attitudes of people in the United States, and their attitude toward marriage? So what are the influences? What I found really fascinating from that study, is that all of the studies that they came up with when they looked at what's influencing it, what was influencing the attitudes were family background factors, particularly the marriages of the families in which they grew up. So, divorce, separation, conflict, all of these factors were influencing the attitude toward marriage.

So let's put this together, we raise several generations that see lots of divorce, we start to have all around us, this kind of genre of marriage is risky, counter to that, we have this belief that if we move in together, we kinda live together, no risk and sex is just part of the enjoyment of relationships, it's not really part of marriage anymore, it's part of just liking somebody. We create all of this, and then we have these attitudes that say, wow, if I form a commitment to you, that commitment puts me at risk.

This in many ways is the context in which all of you are walking into adolescence lives. This is the world in which they are needing to reorganize and change many of their cognitive templates about what relationship formation looks like in successful ways, what is healthy, what is risky, what are the true risks of how to do these things? And so this leads us to a question, which is basically what are some of the most... I'll let Connie read the question because she's going to take it to do some chat. So sorry Connie, I started to do your work for you.

Connie: That's okay, I was just enjoying listening to you, great information. Participants, I would remind you to participate in the chat box, if you would select from the drop down arrow, and select All Participants, when you're chatting that will allow everyone to engage freely with one another and allow everyone to see your responses. And so we would invite you at this time to participate by letting us know what's going on in your program. So what are some of the most common relationship formation pathways that



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you see in the populations you serve? What are the challenges you face with addressing these trends?

John: Yeah, you're so right, I'm looking at what you just wrote and I'll bet almost all of us have had friends or family members that we've had these exact same conversations with.

And it's really hard to convince people, I can remember, I'm still wanting to chat, so feel free to type in anybody but I can remember sitting on an airplane between two people that didn't know each other, they both were in their 20s or maybe early 30s, I think she was in her mid 20s, and he was just early 30s but both of them were actually kind of flirting back and forth, but in the conversation, honestly, what came out was, hey, both of them were like, we want to have all of our fun, have all of our experiences, all the good time before we get married.

So the implication of that, marriage is like incarceration, we gotta have a good time, celebrate life, see the world, have as many relationships as possible, then we'll get locked down. So marriage does not hold much value, has great negativity, Debbie you're so right, they don't see the need for marriage, they don't experience successful marriages, they don't see it in the, and you might say, the communities in which they live.

Connie: Diane has a point here that says the program she's serves youths are removed from the home frequently and are in foster care, and the youth are in custody of DSS. And so they try to tread lightly around the topic of marriage.

John: Dennie, Denna, Denna maybe.

Connie: I need my glasses, sorry.

John: No problem, I think I pronounced that correctly. If I didn't, please forgive me. I think it's Denna, listen Denna, I would probably defer with that. I think that you don't want to like, I mean, first of all, anytime you're dealing with trauma, there are multiple factors, but the vast majority of kids that we work with in terms of adolescence are high risk, and almost all of the settings, my program was taught by a guy up in Fresno, California to 20,000 high school kids in four years with workbooks, so he just had good funding, and he was really on fire.

But probably 75 to 80% of all of the kids in the public high school, he said, would be considered high risk if we started looking at ACEs and AFE, adverse family. So on the

one hand, I don't want to minimize any of that, but on the other hand, what I would say is, a saying that my father used to say is don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, I don't know anybody that really remembers what that's all about, but back in, a long time ago, all the kids would be washed in the same bathwater to save water and the youngest, the little baby, unfortunately got bathed last, starting with the oldest, down to the youngest, so it's like when you're going to throw out that bathwater, make sure you get the baby out first, because it's so muddy, you can hardly find a little kid.

Their whole idea is this, when we're dealing with a lot of difficult areas, let's not lose the good when we're trying to sort through a lot of the negative. And I would say we need to re-instill the value of marriage and help them to know how what their experience in terms of family experience and marital parents, what was wrong about that, and what right looks like.

So just simply saying, we're not going to explain what right looks like because they experienced that type of situation in a wrong way, I think is probably not the best for them. It'd be better for them to work through the trauma in the different ways that you do that, but then to also have a very, kind of in depth understanding of what relationships can look like in very secure settings in terms of marriage. Yeah, you're so right. How do you do that without shaming their own parents?

I think that, I'll use an example, one of the things that we have in the program that Connie mentioned about mine called the PICK Program. So here's one of our own examples, because we work with high school kids, and they talk about what they want to repeat, not repeat, and what they want to do differently or what new things they want to add to their future relationships in marriage and parenting from their own figley background, and so that sensitive area of what do you want to do differently from what you're experiencing right now in your own family someday when you're a grown up, and you form a relationship, and marriage and family?

We walk that tightrope of being able to help kids to practice a sense of discernment and what you will call good judgment without being judgmental. If we try to throw out discernment and good judgment, at the fear of being judgmental, then we leave people powerless to be able to think on their own. So we need to teach them how to be discerning and thoughtful, and also compassionate and empathetic, and forgiving at the same time.

Connie: John, I think we've missed a few but there were a couple of points that were made, I just kinda wanted to bring to your attention and one of them being just the normalization that we see in society, like the cultural norm, what we see in television and on social media and the impact that has, Tammy brought that up in context of trying



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to teach those healthy skills that are difficult when that goes against culture, not just the home, the culture at large.

John: So I was very disappointed over the last, I don't know, 15 years or so. I had three production companies talk to me about doing a kind of a relationship formation show, reality show and using some of my material and it was a bummer, because it didn't come about, so I don't know, I must have blown the interviews. But I would say I have felt that for a long time, Tammy, I just echo it and I say, I think that we definitely need to have ways of trying to envision in our entertainment industry, envision what healthy looks like and really, really sad to say, one of the shows historically that tried to do that and I think did it really, really well was "The Cosby Show" and Mr. Cosby's lifestyle and the contradictions of his personal life just simply kind of just really, I think, for many of us just, made us speechless. And it was so sad that, that was one that actually tried to show what healthy look like, especially, for African Americans and so, but we need many, many more of those, totally agree.

Connie: We're getting so many great questions that I know we need to move on but there's just so many great questions. Thank you for submitting all of those, maybe we can loop back to those.

John: We will, I'm going to move on Connie. So I'm going to go to this next slide, where we're going to talk now, if I can do this, we're going to go through just four studies. So I'm going to zero in on something that I wasn't talking a lot about, which is sexual activity before marriage or outside, when we think of something, so let me just back up for a second. The word premarital technically means anything before marriage or outside of marriage but a lot of times it started to be linked with couples that were heading toward marriage. So it became a much more narrow, kind of focus of couples that were getting ready to marry. So I'm going to mention sexual activity outside of marriage, so we don't confuse that and think about sexual activity in couples that are heading toward marriage, just sexual activity in general.

There were four studies that had specifically to do with sexual activity and does it have any prediction to what goes on in a future marriage relationship. So I call this what happens in Vegas, doesn't stay in Vegas so that's just how we want to think of it. So Vegas is symbolizing or representing the world of being unmarried or single, at any age, does whatever happens there have any predictability to what's going to happen over here in the mainland of marriage? What we find from the studies is that sexual activity is a very, very strong predictor of what happens in marriage.

And so I'm going show you a couple of different angles as to why, why is it a predictor? Mary, hang on to your question, and let's bring that back up. I see that there, when we



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get to the next, but we'll have plenty of time to kind of talk about this, I hope. So the first study used couples, and just in general, what they found was that the sooner that they had sex in their relationship, the more likely they were to move in together and then also, in the long run, the more likely they were to have a lower relationship quality.

So sooner sex led to not only long-term relationship instability, meaning a fragileness of the relationship, a cohabiting relationship, but also a lower quality. So you say, well, why would that be? Well, maybe the second study that was also with couples will add a little more light to that, but I would just say, this is the kind of the starting point that this sexual activity starts to, you might say, prime you toward some relationship decisions that are going to actually decrease the likelihood of success in your relationships.

The second study was with couples as well. The timing of a couple's first sex of act, first sexual act actually predicted the quality of their future marriage relationship. So this was more of a retrospective study. So they took couples that were already had been married for some time, maybe 10 years plus, they gave them all this battery of assessment, looking at the quality of their relationship. So what's your communication like? What's your conflict management like? How do you resolve conflict? What's your sexual relationship like? How satisfied are you in these areas? Your emotional intimacy, things like that.

So they do this whole kind of assessment of the quality of the marriage relationship and the individual's satisfaction. Then they asked them a very simple question on a kind of, I think it was a nine point scale, when did you first have sex with this person that you ended up marrying? So they didn't care about other sexual partners or anything, they just wanted to know when did you first have sex? So I think the the nine points or something like before we started dating, so that would kind of be like a hookup maybe, on the first date, and the first three weeks, from three weeks to three months, from three months to six months, six months to one year, one year to two years, longer than two, like after two years, we waited a whole two years ago, and we started having sex, and then we didn't have sex till we got married.

So I think those were the nine kind of choices. Then they just looked at the correlation between when they first had sex and the quality, the measures of quality in their marriage relationship here 10 years later, what they found was that there was some significant correlate, some things that tied together. So they would say, it seems that the timing of sex actually predicted some of these things, like emotional intimacy, even the sexual satisfaction, which I find pretty interesting. You would think those that added on early on, they are the ones that had a lot of practice, they had the best sexual relationship, but they actually had lower, as a group, they had lower sexual satisfaction



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in their marriage than those that waited even till marriage to start their sexual relationship.

So, some of these findings were kind of interesting. One of the things that I found the most interesting is just this idea of sequence again. Now we're talking about sequence in much more specific ways, particularly applied to this area of sexual involvement. You would think, maybe just on the surface, that it doesn't really matter when you first have sex because if you haven't, like on the first date, and then the relationship goes, you end up getting married, years in the marriage, everything else like your communication, your conflict management, your ability to talk things through in an emotionally close way, that kind of emotional closeness, all those things will eventually catch up.

So the sequence doesn't matter. If you do sex first, those come later or if you do those things first, have good communication, you postpone sex, that you develop all those first, sex comes later, then it all kind of mixes together. But you could conclude from the study that the sequence actually does matter, that those that do sex early on, seem to have a greater risk of not fully developing and maturing the other areas of emotional closeness, relational skill development, they have a higher risk of not developing that, even years into their marriage.

So that it seems like this, postponing sex increases the likelihood that you're going to develop good relationship closeness, understanding of the relationship, partner selection that actually then when you decide, let's get married, you bring sex into that relationship, in that kind of committed framework, up goes, you might say up goes the likelihood that your relationship is going to be not only lasting, but actually much more mutually enjoyable and acceptable.

Two more studies, and then we'll take another question. This was a study just with women. It was a landmark study, I had mentioned this one before. This was by Jay Teachman, I think he's up in Washington University, if I remember right, but don't quote me on that one, but this is a really amazing study. This is the one that I mentioned earlier about cohabitation where they looked at those that cohabited, broke up and then married, and that their divorce rates as a group matched second marriages, even though it was their first marriage.

And that kind of raised the question whether cohabiting breakups had some of the similar impact on people as divorce has. Something that he found that really kind of, I think blew everybody out of the water was that the women that did not have sex before they got married, even though he tried to control, you know, how you do in these studies, he tried to control for socio-economic status, race, religion, all these different factors, so he tried to control for all of that and even after controlling for all that, they still



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had a 300% lower divorce rate, so three times lower divorce rate than the average person.

And this is a consistent finding in all research, that those that wait until marriage to have sex have the lowest divorce rates, and tend as a group to have highest qualities in terms of the quality of marriage. So there's something to consider there. So I know that this is so contrary to what's going on in culture, and we deal with so much dysfunction and people that come from really traumatized and dysfunctional backgrounds, but if we want to help them know a pathway of success, and what right looks like, then we need to dismantle some of the cultural trends, that research has already countered.

So we're not being true to science, when we just let things kind of go according to how our culture is dictating or is promoting. So we need to be kind of true to science as both research informed programs and programs that are evidence based. And then the final study was one with men. This was an interesting study, was done in four different countries and it looked at, we did look at, these were married men. So again, this was a whole database that they looked at of men that were married and they just looked at one factor about men in their marriage, and it was did they ever have an act of infidelity? So it's kind of an interesting, do they ever have sex with somebody other than their marriage partner, in other words?

So they wanted to see, did the number of sexual partners they had before they got married, did that have any kind of predictive quality or statistical significance, predictive power of the likelihood that they're going to cheat, and they obviously found, so they did that, those that had zero sexual partners before they married, those that had one, those that had two, three, four, on and on, so they would put them in that group. So you were in the group of three sexual partners, what's the percentage of that group that had cheated? And how did that percentage compare statistically to the percentage that had four or five or six sexual partners? So that's kind of how they did it, and they found significant, statistically significant differences between the percentages of these different groups.

And obviously, the one, and this is similar types of studies have been replicated, really up to very recent studies. And some of the largest, I put a couple of books that Mark Regnerus did, one called, "Premarital Sex in America", it was actually the largest study of premarital sex ever conducted. Also, similar findings that basically this, that those that wait not only have higher quality in marriage, lower divorce rates, but they have the lowest likelihood that this study found, most likelihood of cheating. So these are, you say, what, this just makes sense.



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I mean, whether you're a man or a woman, whomever you are, a human being that builds a relationship and practices sexual boundaries, when they're turned on by the person that they're with, develops the muscle of self-discipline. I mean, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to say or rocket scientist to say, that person is going to carry into their long-term relationship and probably marriage, that same muscular strength, that if they're attracted to somebody else, they're going to be able to say, I'm not going there. So it just kind of all makes sense. And the person that doesn't practice much self-discipline or have much of a boundary, they just like somebody and immediately engage in a sexual relationship and they do that on multiple occasions with different people, when they get married, they, obviously are going to have a higher likelihood to engage in a similar pattern of behavior.

We're creatures of habit, all of us. And so whatever habits we form, whatever mindsets we form pre- marriage, before marriage, those mindsets carry on into marriage. And for some of us, for some people, there's a lot of things that they have to try to address once they're married, because they didn't realize all the things that were kind of like getting established in their own mind and heart and in their own practice or their behavior. So what topic areas that predict positive marriage outcomes really need to be included or more emphasized? So, this question is kind of generalizing what we're talking about, so we're going to take just, we only have three minutes for this one, and we're really going to restrict it to three minutes. So, Connie, I just read your question. I'm sorry, I get into a roll and I just like don't stop.

Connie: Well, it looks like in the chat box, folks are enjoying the enthusiasm. So we'd encourage you again, participants to go ahead and select the All Participants function and go ahead and chat in the box with Dr. Van Edd, the clock is ticking, so hurry.

John: Yeah, and just to anticipate where we're going, I'm going to bring all of this into a model that I really like, that helps us to think about, so what do we do with all of this? How do we actually try to help people? Yeah, healthy communication, actually talk to each other, I appreciate that Vicki.

Connie: Looks like folks might be anxious to hear the rest of what you have to say.

John: I'll do that, Brian, I just want to recognize Brian, I really appreciate what you're saying that, yeah, I think that if we really help people to understand these things, especially 14 to 19 year olds, there is a lot of impressionability, if we neglect it, where are they going to ever hear it? But if we do it in really gracious ways, in non-judgmental ways, if we emphasize that they have the power to make changes in decisions and how



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they do relationships that can totally alter the trajectory of their future and what they establish.

And they don't have to live in any of the trauma of the past, not only in within themselves, but they don't need to recreate a type of relationship that mimics any of those problems, and we're going to help you know, some good ideas on how you can do that, and really kind of set you loose, to change the future of your life, of your relationships. I think giving them those optimism and tangible ways to do that becomes really, really empowering. And so it's very, very necessary I think, for our programs to be able to step into this arena and help them to, yeah, absolutely, Casey, helping them to have respect, open communication.

But also I would just really kind of emphasize this, we live in a very, it's kind of, we have a lot of contradictions out there in our society and in culture at large, so a lot of strange contradictions, where we're not supposed to be judgmental of anybody, but we really have a lot of very judgmental stuff that goes on too, but I think helping to differentiate being judgmental from being discerning, becomes really, really possible and help, and ultimately empowering.

Connie: I don't want to interrupt you, but I had two messages that came through privately and I think they're very important, and so if you don't mind, I'd like to just pose those to you very quickly, one of them kind of speaks to the interactive model that has so been a part of your work. And the two, I'll just read both of them, same time. And one is that I think some youth need to fully understand what respect looks like in a relationship and how that carries over into communication. The other one is similar, if they're already engaged in sexual activity, how do we relay this information without really shaming them? So those questions are like centered around respect, respect for one and then how do we teach that respect and then also give that respect?

John: Okay, Connie, I'm going to hang on to those and when we finish this section, let's include those in the question answer, okay?

Connie: Great, okay, we'll do.

John: So, I want to go through this. So right in the middle of this model is the word intention. So this is a really interesting theory, I think, it's an old theory, it was developed in the mid '80s by Icek Ajzen, or if you are Dutch you would say Icek Ajzen. But he really developed a great model, I think that captures three major influences of intentionality. So kind of ignore right now the gray, he said that a person's attitudes and that had to do with their beliefs, their feelings, kind of when you appraise something, do you think of it as positive or negative?



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Subjective norm, that's really the social influences. It's like, what are the voices surrounding me? What are those voices is saying about this topic area? Whatever the topic area is, so what is your belief in feelings for this topic area? What are the voices all around me, the voices of culture, friends, family, those are all the voices, media, technology, all these voices, social media, what are all the voices? These are all the social influences, and then the perceived behavioral control was what he that's not me by the way. Somebody needs to just hit the mute button again.

Connie: I think all participants are muted.

John: Well, somebody's not, because that's not me. Perceived behavior control, oftentimes was referred to as internal or external locus of control. It was like, how achievable is this really? So I chose three topic areas to kind of plug into his model. So he said, "What you have in terms of your intentions, leads to your behavior." So many people have kind of emphasize this, you got to be decisive about things, don't just slip into a decision, you got to really be intentional about making your decision. So a lot of people talk about this. What I like about his model is that he broke down exactly what we mean and what goes into being intentional.

So let's talk about marriage. What's going on out there about marriage? Well, the attitude, the beliefs and the feelings about marriage are very unfavorable for the most part, marriage is seen, as we mentioned, as a high risk, there's a lot of problems with it, it oftentimes leads to divorce, the influences, the voices, so an individual's attitude, if they came from a broken home, if they saw trauma, their personal attitude is what we're talking about. So we're not talking about what everybody else is saying. What have they internalized? What are their personal beliefs and feelings about marriage?

Well, we already saw a huge study that found that one of the strongest predictors of marriage outcomes is the attitude and beliefs, the emotional beliefs, so the affective beliefs meaning an attitude is a belief with feeling. So the attitudes that they hold about marriage actually affect their intentionality, which ultimately affects their behavior. Now also, what Icek says is like, we got to look at, what are the influences? What we've said, all around them, not only in their history that they've internalized, maybe their own personal experience, but now all around them are all these voices that are very negative toward marriage and many people think it's very difficult.

So some of the studies on the Millennial generation, meaning those in their 20s and 30s, when they've asked them about marriage, they say they want to get married, but they think it's very, very difficult to achieve a good marriage. So there's this perceived inability to actually achieve it. Those three areas need to be addressed in your



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programs. We need to surface the personal feelings and beliefs about marriage and family. We need to identify the voices of culture, which is the social influences and help to show where those are coming from and what is accurate, and what is not accurate about those voices and what they're saying.

And then we need to increase the ability that individuals feel, especially adolescence, of how to achieve this, so we need to make it possible. Those are the things that are going to increase their ability to actually marry successfully, but it's going to come from their intentionality and their intentionality is going to actually come from addressing their attitude, their understanding of their culture, and their internal locus of control.

So let's go in contrast to gravitation. The personal kind of emotional beliefs, aspect of beliefs are very, very favorable toward cohabitation, very negative toward marriage, very favorable toward cohabitation.

The voices of culture are like it's no big deal, it's risk-free, and the ability to achieve it, very easy. You don't have, no paperwork, nothing. You like somebody, they have a residence, just move in. So, here we go, we need to actually address some of these same three areas and just, you might say, the opposite way, we need to show that the ease of moving in with somebody actually holds much greater risks than what is perceived and what the voices of culture say and we need to help them to shape some differing opinions and beliefs with some emotion about these risk factors without being judgmental.

You're going to have a lot of these kids that you work with, their parents are living with somebody. And you're like, "Oh my gosh, well, we can't talk about that." I know organizations that say, we can't talk about living together because their parents are living with somebody. But you can say, listen, there are a lot of us that grew up seeing a parent do something that we came to believe we wanted to do differently. And we can make choices like that for our own life, while being loving toward a parent that does it a little differently.

And helping them to have that kind of individuality with that own sense of locus of control, I think is a very valuable part of working with teens. The last is, same with sexual activity. You're going to deal with a lot of teens whose parents are unmarried, go out with somebody, immediately that person spends the night and they're right there in the home and they see their parent or they see siblings having sex. So are we to not address this area? So, the idea that we can't address something that may be contrary to those that they care about and love, and the lifestyle that those people have chosen, or contrary to something in their past, there's no way to address that without being shaming and judgmental, I think boxes us in to not address some of the most salient important areas of relationship formation.



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Research has showed us these areas are extremely important. They not only affect outcomes, ultimately in marriage years later, but they affect the whole economics it seems, and the ability to build good economics or to get actually locked in to some of the troubling or difficulty of economics. These things all seem to, you might say, have tentacles going into lots of different areas but the reality is many of our students are going to be either having a lifestyle or have made choices, or they have people in their own circle, that have a lifestyle that is contrary to what is good data, good understanding, good relationship formation.

So, a very important point is to be able to address these things and keep emphasizing, it is good for you to make choices of your own. And we all, as we grow up, we have to think about how our mom or dad, or any of the adults around us or even what we see on television, or what we see on the internet or any other apps that we use, or any of these social media platforms, we all have to, as we grow up, part of growing up is thinking for yourself and so, being able to look at this and think about, how do I want to do sexual activity?

Well, the intention is going to go back to, have we helped to reshape their own personal, emotional or affective beliefs about sex, their bodies, engaging in sexual activity? Have we helped them to sort through the subjective norms or the social voices? And have we empowered them to feel that they can achieve this? If we've done that in our programming, then we are helping ultimately, to give them the resources to act in ways that are in their best interest. So we have two questions here, and we have these questions that are just general. So Connie, do you mind saying both of these questions and we'll open it up, and have now just kind question and answer with these two questions and any others, you can then recite the ones that were asked and I'll try to address those.

Connie: Okay, great. What specific personal or relational skills need to be developed that will enhance future marital success?

John: You can read the second one too, Connie I think.

Connie: Can you advance that for me?

John: Oh, I did.

Connie: Okay, what specific changes or adaptations will better align your educational programs with the body of research?

John: And then go ahead and re-read the two that came in privately.



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Connie: Okay, let me scroll back to those. One was, some yet need to fully understand what respect looks like in relationships and how that carries over into other topics such as communication. And then the other one was related to sexual activity. If some of the youth are already engaging in sexual activity, how do we relay this information to them without shaming? That's a part of some of the other questions as well as, you know, if parents are cohabitating, and maybe some of the classroom teachers where presentations are taking place about marriage, or cohabitating, how do we present this information and not be shaming about it? So two separate sets of questions there.

John: So I'm going to start with the second one, and then I'm going to have you re-read the first one, so we get to where we're all on the same page. Yeah, I would just, for me, I would probably call it the old elephant in the room. I'd probably say there's an elephant in the room and this is some of us, some of you, some of the adults in your life, maybe I'd even look at the teacher, maybe even you, I don't know, have made choices or living contrary, or differently than what we're talking about here. So we're going to talk about the importance of how we go about building a relationship, and the sequence that we follow or the steps that we follow, and what we have found in research, and we're going to try to bring that all into our conversation or discussion in this lesson, what we have found is that what we do first and what we do second, and what we do third, kind of like major choices that we make actually matter.

And so we're going to talk about that. I think the second thing you can say is, we're surrounded by a lot of kind of messages or messaging, that seems to put a big question mark on the value of marriage, but I want to do two things, I want to talk about some of the benefits that we have found that marriage really brings, and what a good marriage really looks like. Because a lot of us have seen some pretty bad marriages, and we've seen that maybe in some series on TV, Netflix or some other Amazon series, or we've just seen it in lives around us. And so just because we've seen something done poorly or done in some negative ways, doesn't ultimately mean that, that thing is bad. So we want to talk about what a good marriage looks like.

I think if you do that, I think if you've had any personal stories that are appropriate and applicable, I think that, that makes a lot of sense. You know, for me, I actually grew up in a fairly decent home life but my mom died when I was 15 years old and my dad re-married to someone that he met, he married after about two and a half months, and I can tell a little bit about my own and some of the major impact it had on myself and my four siblings, so there are five of us in my family and the four siblings in my stepmothers family when they made that decision, and pulled what they did right and some of the things that they could have done better, and that's how we want to think of relationships.



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So I think these are things that are really valuable to try to say, where I would go, kind of as conclusion because I'm seeing our time's run out, is what I would say is this, if we don't help to step into this area of what a healthy relationship formation, like what the steps are, sequencing, things that are done first versus second, and the outcomes, if we don't step into there, and if we don't step into talking about what healthy, good marriage relationships look like and how they can benefit you, and how they can ultimately benefit the children, if they're done in healthy and positive ways. If we don't step into there, my question to you is, who is going to? Ultimately, I think, people won't ever get this information. Kids don't get this information unless we step into it and help them to sort it through.

Connie: Thank you so much, John. This is great, valuable information and lots of positive feedback, folks really showing love for what you have shared here. Folks are also wanting to know how they can get additional questions answered and additional resources, I hope you don't mind, we're putting up your contact information and directing folks to you with those questions. And so we apologize that we didn't have more time for questions at the end, but please feel free to reach out to Dr. Van Epp and pick his brain and ask for additional resources. And so thank you again, Dr. Van Epp for your time.

John: Thank you, Connie, great to be with all of you and thank all of you, I want to thank all of you for all the work that you do. You are really doing phenomenal work and you'll never know how dramatically you impact youth lives 10 years later with what you're doing. But just know it, believe it and don't doubt it, you're doing a great job, thank you guys.

Connie: Thank you for attending.

Megan: Thank you, Connie and thank you again, Dr. Van Epp. We will go ahead and leave this contact information for just another few moments, for those who want to grab that before the webinar ends today but we will go ahead and end it here. Thank you for attending and we hope you have a great rest of your day.