



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

Ministry Strategy– Family Formation Studies  
Glenn T. Stanton

*Helping Families Thrive*

Colorado Springs, CO 80995  
FocusOnTheFamily.com  
800-A-FAMILY  
(232-6459)

February 15, 2011

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**To:** Jim Daly and Interested Students of the Family

**Re:** **Best Age to Marry?**

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## *What is the best age to get married?*

Both parents and young adults ask this question quite often, each wanting to make sure that new marriages are established upon the strongest foundation of life experience, maturity, as well as educational and financial security.

There is not a great wealth of research on this question, but there is some good data that can be helpful to young men and women and their parents. And good scholars disagree on the topic to small degrees, but there is a general window where most agree.

Two of the best sources are Norval Glenn<sup>1</sup> (UT, Austin) and Paul Amato<sup>2</sup> (Penn State).

Professor Glenn in his recent published study, drawing from five different American data sets, explains,

“The greatest...likelihood of being in an intact marriage of the highest quality is among those who married at age 22-25.”<sup>3</sup>

He explains that marriages formed at ages later than this fared very well in *survival*, but “rather poorly” in *quality*.

However and importantly, Glenn explains that it would be “premature to conclude that the optimal time for first marriage *for most persons* is ages 22-25” because other critical factors impact risk of divorce and marital happiness as well.

*Age at marriage doesn't stand alone as a benefit or harm.* The most significant additional factors are:

- premarital cohabitation
- socio-economics
- having parents who are divorced
- educational attainment
- general maturity and personal commitment to the idea of marital longevity
- having healthy marriage attitudes and behaviors modeled by both sets of parents
- involvement in a healthy church/faith setting that takes marriage seriously
- completed meaningful premarital counseling

Given this qualification, Professor Glenn concludes his article by stating,

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<sup>1</sup> Norval D. Glenn, Jeremy E. Ueker, Robert W.B. Love Jr., “Later First Marriage and Marital Success,” *Social Science Research* 39 (2010) 787-800.

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Amato, Alan Booth, David R. Johnson, Stacy J. Rogers, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America is Changing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 77-79.

<sup>3</sup> Glenn, *et al.*, 2010, p. 787.



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“The findings of this study *do* indicate that for most persons, little or nothing in the way of marital success is likely to be gained by deliberately delaying marriage beyond the mid-twenties.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul Amato explains that marrying at a “young age is one of the best predictors of divorce.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, we must ask what he means by “young.” Amato is referring to those marrying in their teens. He explains,

“Once people enter their early to mid-twenties, the risk of divorce is attenuated [reduced]. Indeed, people who postpone marriage until their thirties face a dwindling supply of potential partners – a situation that may increase the likelihood of forming unions with partners who are not good marriage material. In other words, marrying “too late” may increase the risk of having a troubled relationship.”<sup>6</sup>

W. Bradford Wilcox (U of Virginia) concurs with these two findings from his own analysis of the National Survey of Family growth data, explaining, “Couples who marry in their mid-twenties tend to do best, when you combine a consideration of quality and stability.”<sup>7</sup>

Wilcox adds though, “But I think couples can marry somewhat earlier than this IF they are embedded in a supportive church community that gives them direction, support and healthy role models.”

Dr. Mark Regnerus (UT, Austin), who wrote the popular cover story for *Christianity Today* (August 2009), “The Case for Early Marriage,” jokingly encourages that marrying after “you’re 80 is probably the best way to guarantee that you’ll stay married the rest of your life!”<sup>8</sup>

Regnerus says he would push the number a bit lower than other sociologists “to 22’ish, because the data suggests it’s not a major risk of divorce over the next 10 years.” However, he admits that not divorcing is not the same as having both quality and stability.

And “earlier” marriage in the 22-age window increases the likelihood of couples marrying as virgins, which is an important factor in marital stability and happiness.<sup>9</sup>

**Conclusion:** The 22 to 25 age-at-first-marriage range seems to be that which enhances both the quality and stability of marriage.

Waiting longer than 25 years-of-age does not appear to boost either of these marital measures, nor does it doom them, but could serve to work against them for various reasons.

*Note:* Median age of first marriage today - 26 for women and 28 for men – is the highest it’s ever been since the Census has collected such numbers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn, *et al.*, 2010, p. 799.

<sup>5</sup> Amato, *et al.*, 2007, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Amato, *et al.*, 2007, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence, 1.26.11

<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence, 1.27.11

<sup>9</sup> Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation and The Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003) 444-455; Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, “Premarital Sex and Risk of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991) 845-855.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Regnerus, “The Case for Early Marriage,” *Christianity Today*, August 2009, p. 23; Arland Thornton, *et al.*, *Marriage and Cohabitation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 55.

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