



**national
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NHMRC April 2008 Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

**Research Update: Cohabitation—What Can We Learn
From the Latest Research Findings?**

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1. Why do people choose to live together?

There is a spectrum of choices people make from being single to living together to being married, and there are varying reasons behind each living arrangement decision. The decision to live together often seems to be a gradual decision as opposed to a deliberate choice (“sliding” vs. “deciding”). The changing demographics and numbers of people who choose to cohabit reflect at one level a shift in people’s view of marriage, but also a growing ambiguity in the transitions people make from lower levels of commitment to more stable committed relationships. There are a variety of reasons for why some couples choose to cohabit. For some, it might be influenced by their perceived instability of marriage, and therefore cohabitation becomes an intermediary step before marriage, an opportunity to verify compatibility. Other couples choose to cohabit to save money. Some might view cohabitation as a path to marriage, as an option to take the relationship to the next level, or a means of spending more time together. Others view cohabitation as a way to provide their children with a two-parent home.

2. What are the risks of cohabitating before marriage?

Commitment to the Relationship—Research indicates that the level of commitment to a relationship is the strongest predictor of relationship quality, not whether or not a couple is married. While women do not appear to have lower levels of commitment to their relationships with men they cohabited with before marriage, research shows that married men who have cohabited with their partners are much less committed to their relationship than men who did not cohabit with their partners before marriage.

Domestic Violence—No research to date indicates

that cohabitation increases the likelihood of violence for those living in cohabiting households. However, there is evidence indicating that individuals in cohabiting relationships are more likely to report having been shoved or pushed aggressively by their partner, than individuals who are married.

3. What are some of the trends you have seen related to cohabitation?

Along with the increased delay in first marriages, there has also been an increase in couples who choose to cohabit. Some researchers recognize a general change in the cultural perspectives of cohabitation. For example, an increasing number of people see cohabitation as an intermediary step before marriage. Certain parts of the country exhibit significantly higher numbers of cohabiting couples than other areas. In some areas the increase in cohabitation is due to changing behavioral patterns, like a higher number of older adults choosing to cohabit. While there is not a single variable that accounts for all of the changes we are seeing, we do see that amongst certain groups, cohabitation is increasingly viewed as an acceptable transitional phase for couples who are becoming more serious about their relationship. Contrary to common belief, the individuals who choose to cohabit are diverse, with varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

4. Have you identified variations in decisions to marry or cohabit across different racial or ethnic groups?

The choice to cohabit is influenced by cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and the decision to cohabit or not cohabit is reflective of unique factors that vary amongst different communities. When working with various communities, it is important to keep in mind

that there are different barriers to and incentives for choosing marriage or cohabitation. For example, even among groups who share similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, recent immigrants may hold different views of cohabitation than those who have been in the country longer or grew up in the United States. The decision of whether or not to cohabit can also be influenced by financial constraints, family expectations, or social mores. Relationship education programs that recognize and respect the many factors influencing the decisions couples make about cohabitation can be effective in helping these couples strengthen their relationships.

5. You presented data that indicate children who live with their married biological parents tend to be better off in a number of ways than children of cohabiting couples and children in step-families. Have you noticed any exceptions to this?

While research has shown children living with their two biological parents fare better in regards to certain issues than children living with single parents or in step-families, we cannot assume that family structure with two biological parents present is the only option for providing a healthy home. Many other variations of a strong home might work very well, though the research on these different living arrangements is more limited. However, research indicates that just because a couple has been living together for a long time doesn't mean that the relationship has become more stable over that period of time.

6. How can marriage education programs use the research that you presented on risk sequences and relationship insecurity to inform their programs?

Marriage education programs can play an important role in helping couples understand that one of the

keys to a solid relationship is having good information about their relationship. Couples can obtain this information through effective communication, a skill taught by most marriage education programs.

In order for couples to make informed decisions about whether or not they should pursue a serious relationship together, they need information on: 1) Risks: Are there issues such as violence, substance abuse, or mental health concerns in the relationship? 2) Compatibility: Do we share the same values? Are there unhealthy dynamics in the way we relate to each other? 3) Commitment: Are we dedicated to each other? Are we equally committed to our relationship? Do we have similar desires for our future together? Are we faithful to each other?

Once couples have an understanding of where they stand on the issues of risk, compatibility, and commitment, they are in a much better place to make a conscious decision to commit to a long-term, serious, and stable relationship.

Couples who slide, rather than decide, to be in a serious relationship, may find themselves at a disadvantage. After sharing housing, finances, or having children together, they may find that they aren't compatible or committed to each other.

Marriage educators can play an important role in helping couples develop the skills to gather information about their relationship before deciding to cohabit or marry. For programs working with cohabiting couples, they can also help couples evaluate their relationships in terms of risk and compatibility. Having this information will help couples make informed choices about the future of their relationships together.