

Adolescent and Young Adults' Relationship Expectations and Experiences

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<https://mastresearchcenter.org/>



<https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr.html>

Adolescence and young adulthood

- The teen and early young adult years are a life course stage in which there are many changes
 - Complete schooling
 - Leave the parental home
 - Enter the labor force
 - Form romantic relationships
- These behaviors are part of the *transition to adulthood*
 - Taking longer to undergo these behaviors

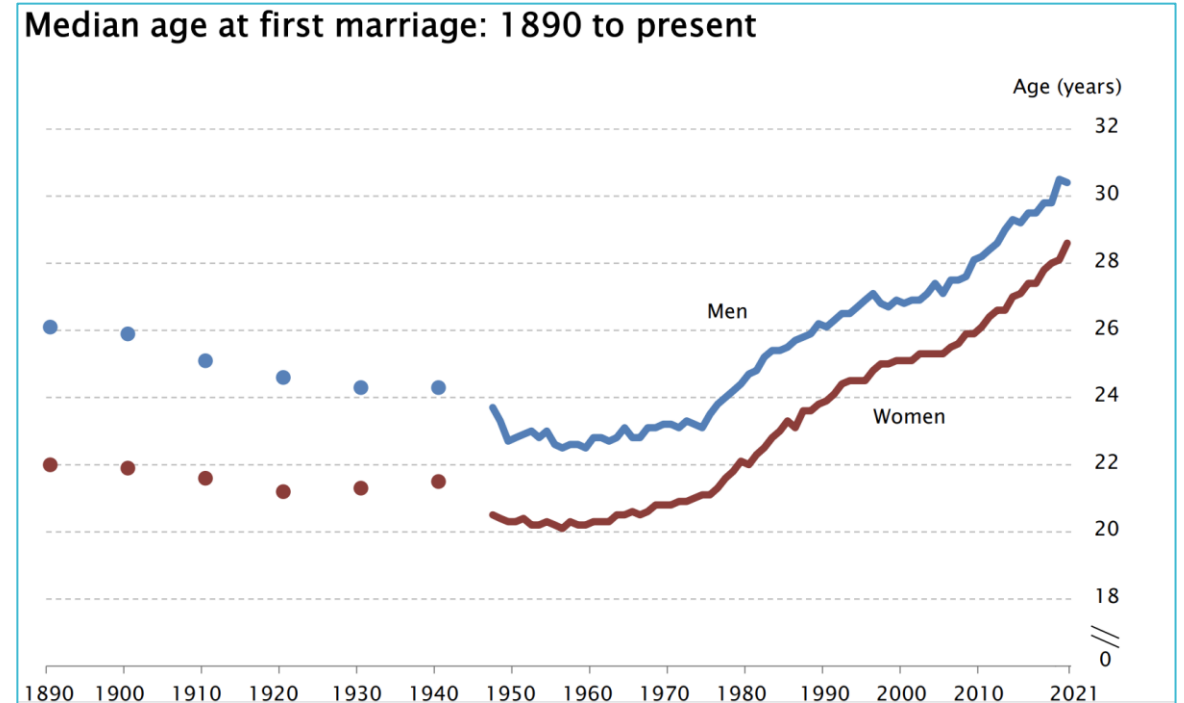


Trends in family behaviors

- The dating behaviors of today's teens and young adults occurs amid a backdrop of
 - Rising age at marriage
 - Widespread acceptability of cohabitation

Age at First Marriage

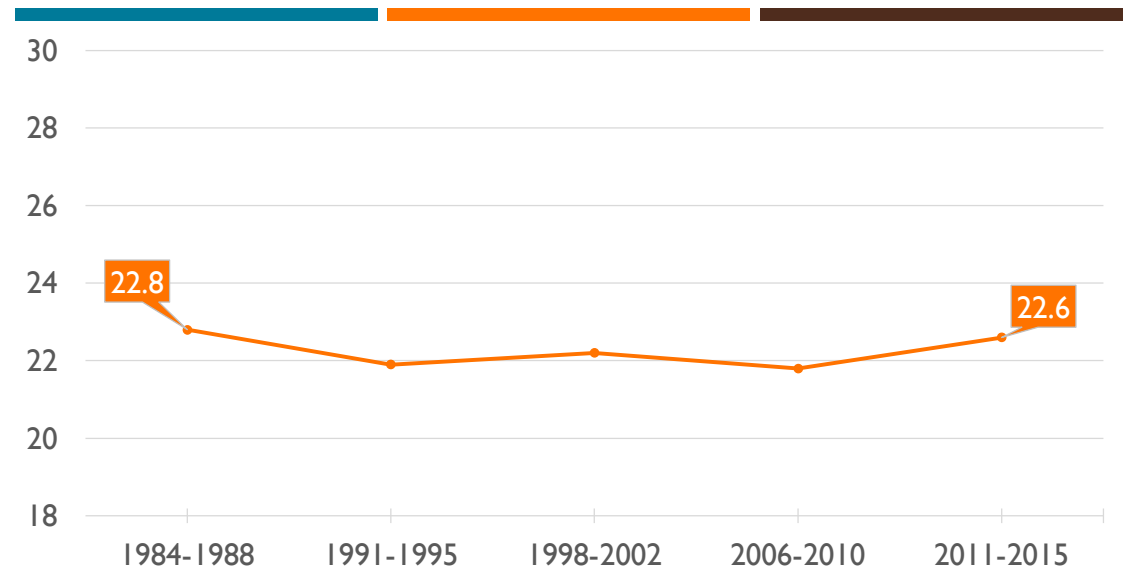
- Age at first marriage continues to rise
- In 2021, the age at first marriage was 28 for women and age 30 for men.



Age at First Cohabitation

- For most people today, their first experience living with a romantic partner will be outside of marriage
 - Most newlyweds lived with their spouses prior to marriage
- Age at first cohabitation is age 23 and has remained stable over time
 - In fact, the age at which young people first live with a partner has not changed much

Women's Median Age at First Cohabitation



Trends in family behaviors

- The dating behaviors of today's teens and young adults occurs amid a backdrop of
 - Rising age at marriage
 - Widespread acceptability of cohabitation
 - Rising age at first birth
 - Declining teen births

Age at Birth

- Age at first birth continues to rise
- In 2020, the age at first birth was 27 for women (and about 3-4 years older for men).

Average age of mother at first birth

Across all areas of the U.S., women are having their first child later in life.

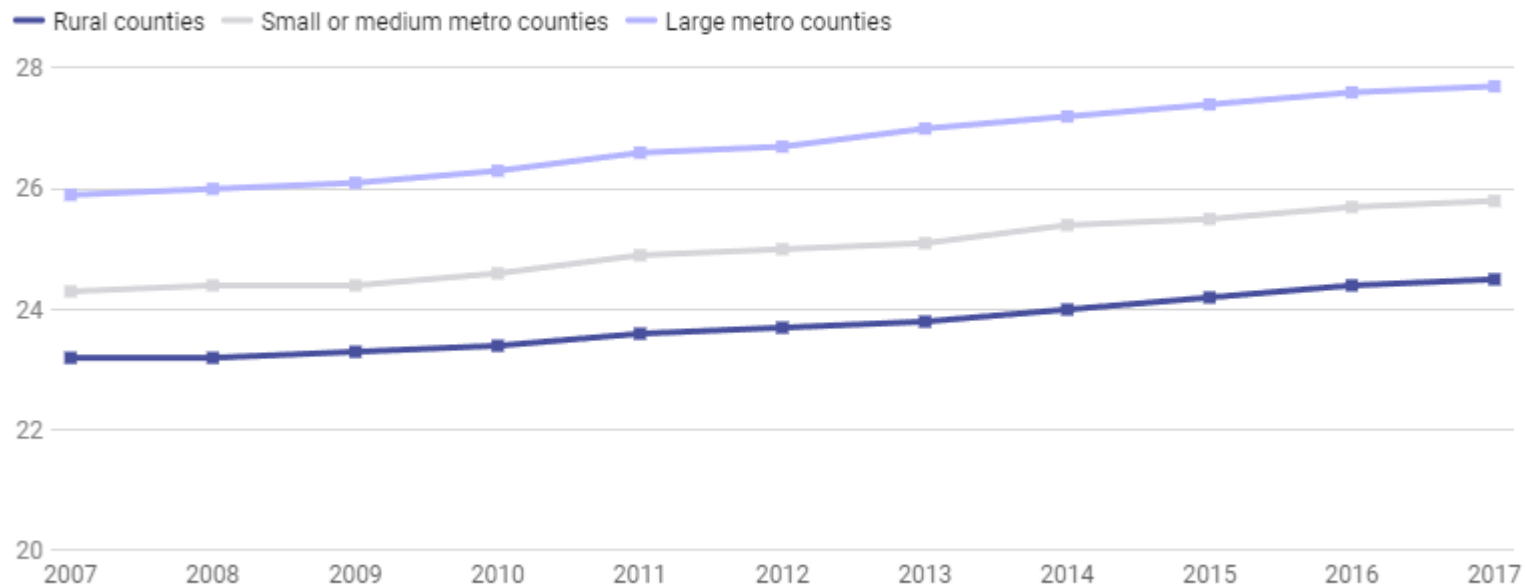
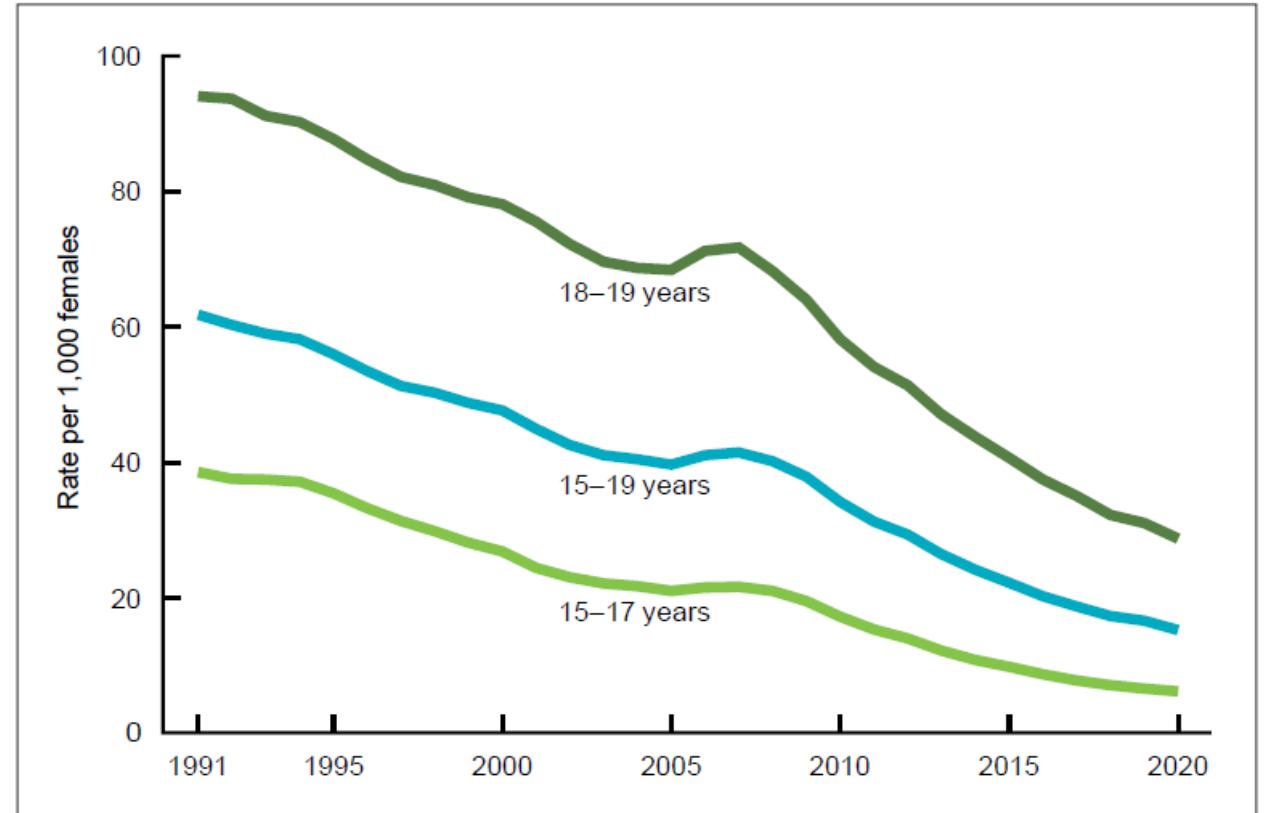


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: [CDC](#) • [Get the data](#)

Teen childbearing

- Birth rates among teens are declining
- Birth rates for women 20-24 are also declining

Figure 2. Birth rates for teenagers, by age of mother: United States, final 1991–2019 and provisional 2020



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Natality.

Webinar goals

Relationship and family
expectations and attitudes

Webinar goals

Relationship and family expectations and attitudes

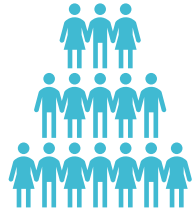
Relationship experiences

Webinar goals

Relationship and family expectations and attitudes

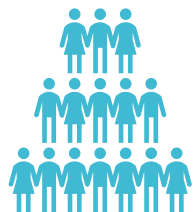
Relationship experiences

Relationship quality



Teens (15-19) and young adults (usually
20-25, sometimes up to age 30)

Definitions and Approach



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Original research using nationally representative data

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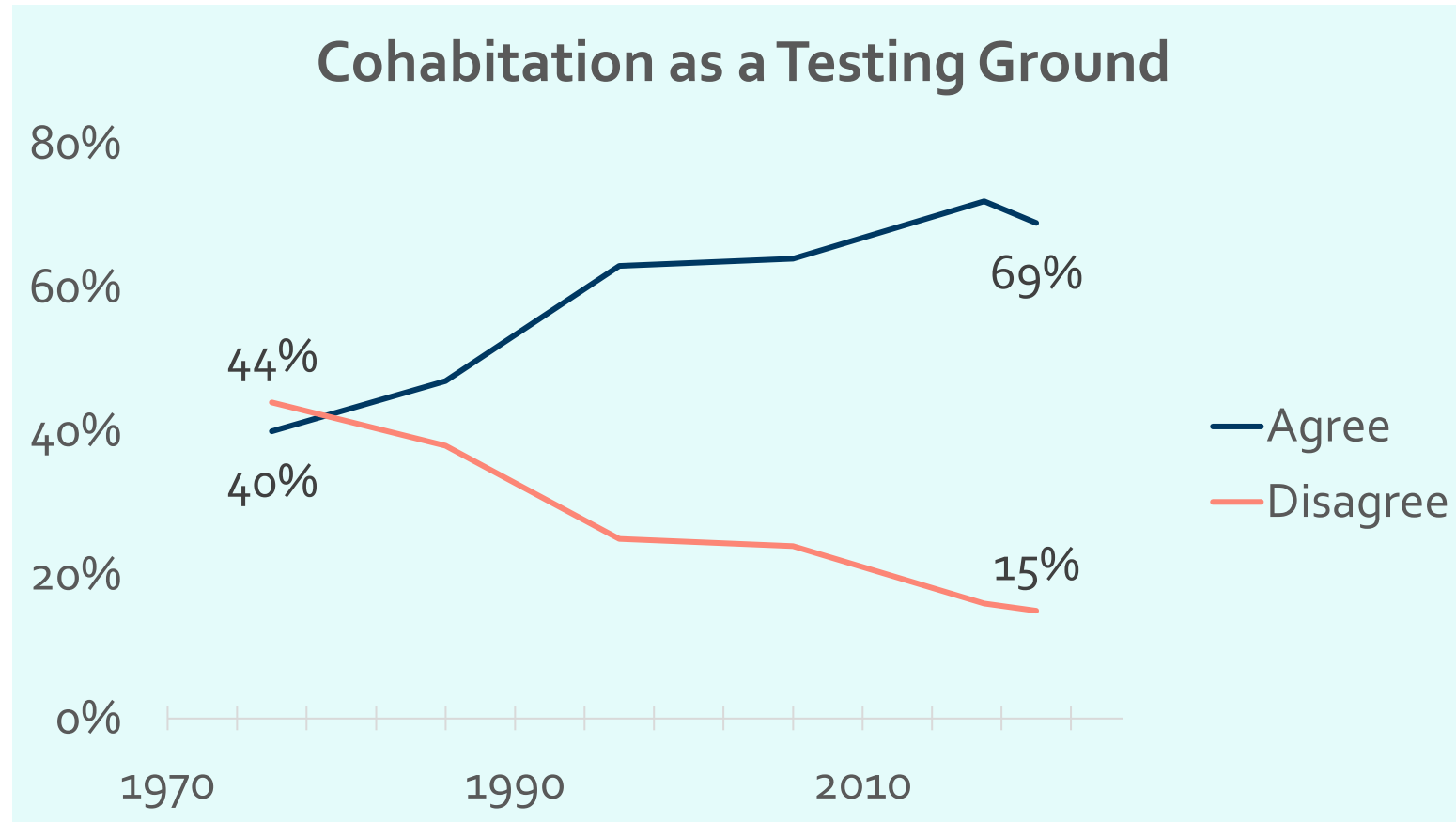


Review studies on teens' and young adults' relationships published since 2010

Definitions and Approach

Attitudes toward Cohabitation

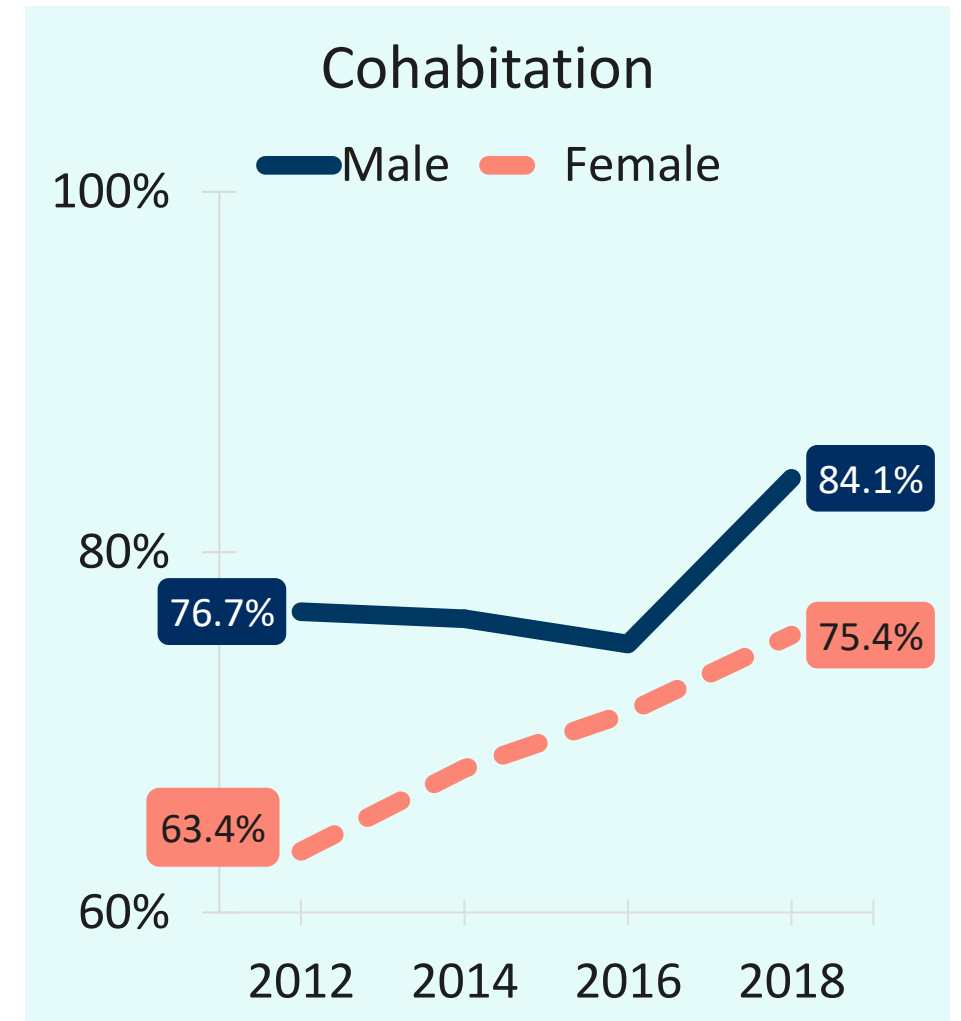
- Teens are increasingly likely to agree that cohabitation is a testing ground for marriage.
 - Share agreeing with the statement: "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along."



Source: NCFMR analyses of Monitoring the Future, 1976-2020

Expectations of Cohabitation

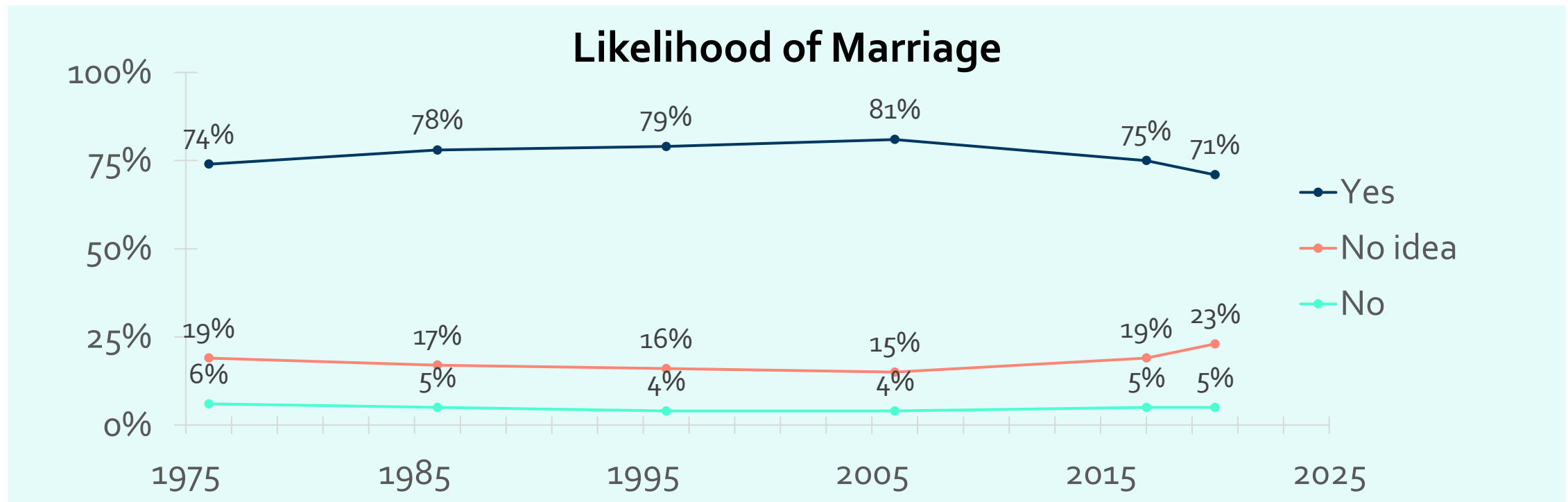
- Many teens expect they themselves will live with a partner outside of marriage
- In general, the share of teens 15-19 who expect to live with a partner is high, especially if the definition includes living with a future spouse prior to marriage
 - About a third of young women 18-24 expect to marry without living with their spouse beforehand
- Over the past decade, the share who expect to cohabit has increased
- A higher share of teen boys than teen girls expect to cohabit



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

Expectations of Marriage

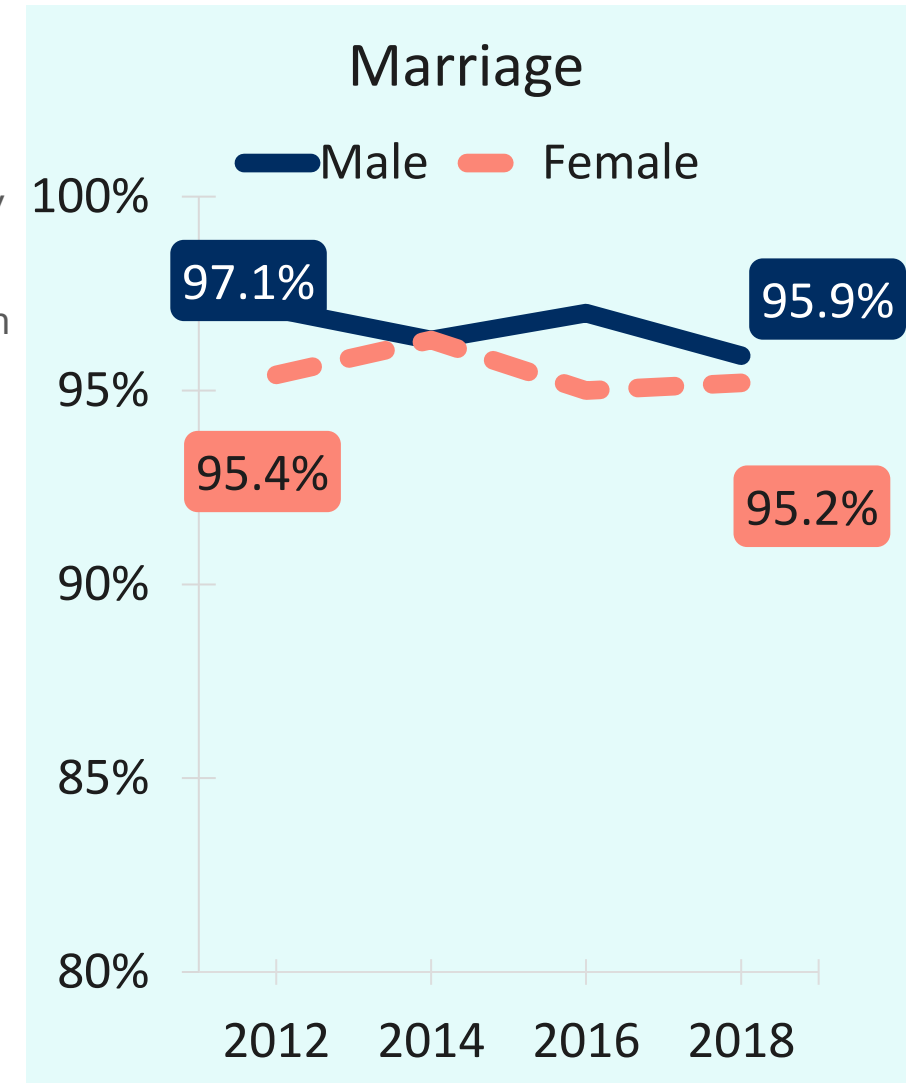
- The majority of teens think they will marry
- There is rising uncertainty about marriage, though little evidence that teens are definitively rejecting marriage
 - Responses to question: "Which do you think you are most likely to choose in the long run?" Choices included: getting married, no idea, or not getting married



Source: NCFMR analyses of Monitoring the Future, 1976-2020

Expectations of Marriage

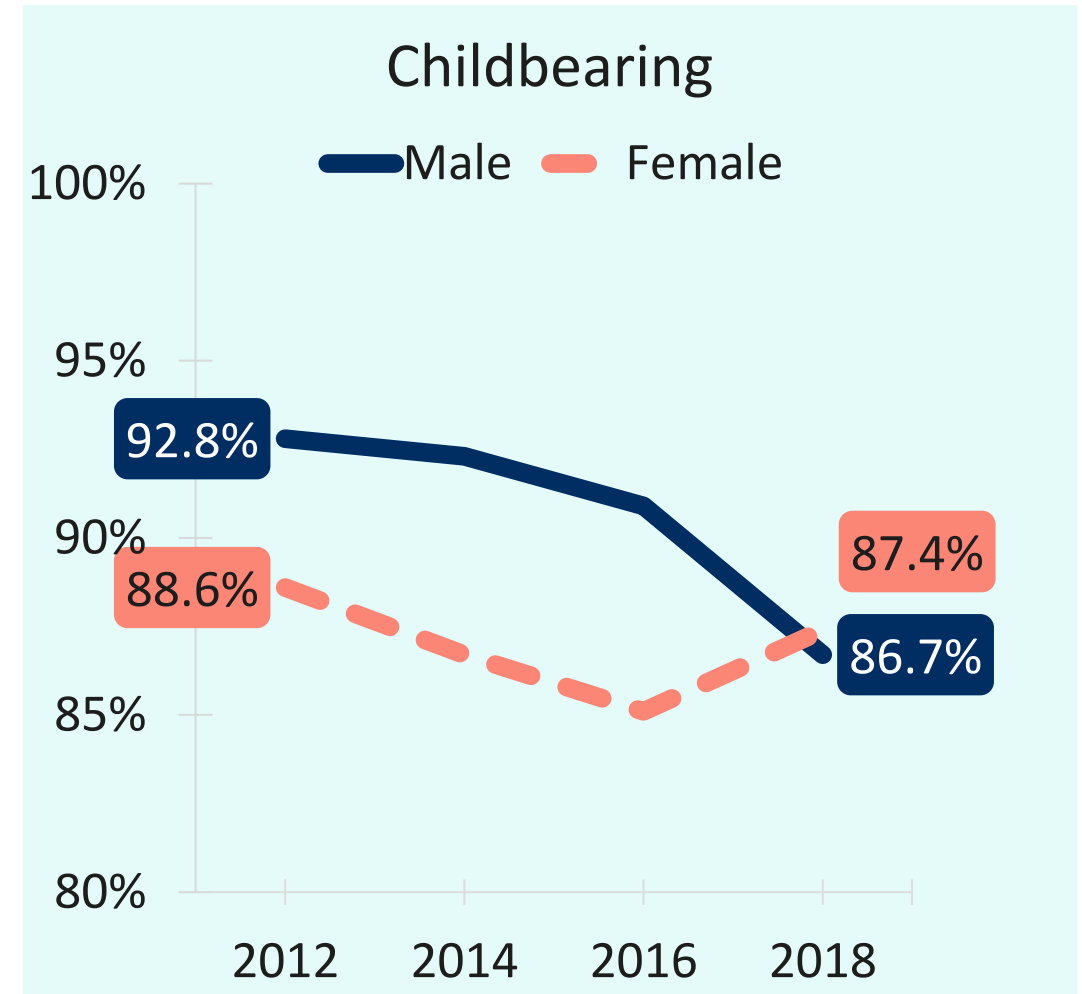
- Question wording and options may matter
 - “What is the chance you will get married someday?” Definitely yes, probably yes, probably not, definitely not
 - Showing the “definitely” and “probably” yes combined *but* worth pointing out that a greater share of these overall favorable responses are in the ‘probably yes’ category
- Also see that gender differences in expectations of marriage are minimal



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

Intentions to Have Children

- The majority of teens intend to become a parent at some point.
- In recent years, the share of teen boys who intend to have a child has declined by six percentage points
- For teen girls, the share declined between 2012 and 2016 but has since risen
 - Gender differences are now minimal



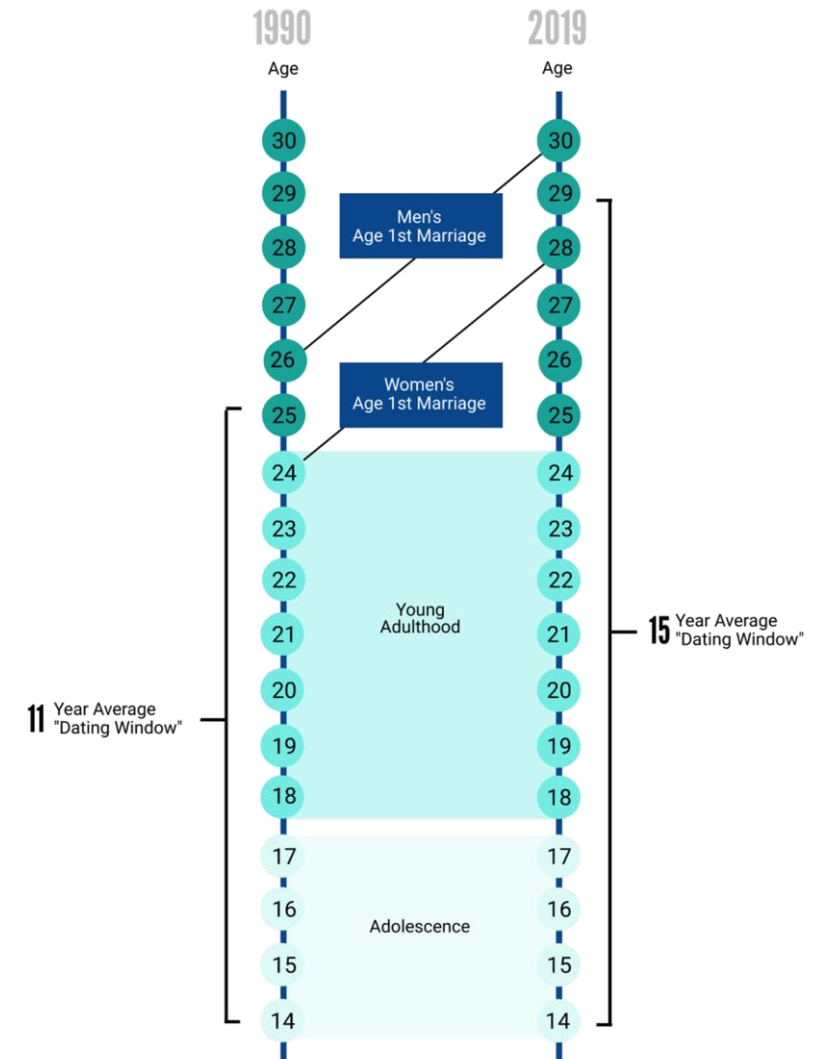
Source: NCFMR analyses of National Survey of Family Growth data

Relationship and Family Expectations and Attitudes

- The majority of teens expect to cohabit, marry, and have children
- There is some variation in factors linked to these expectations and attitudes
 - Young people in relationships have higher expectations of marriage
 - Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower expectations of marriage but not of cohabitation
- Attitudes, expectations, and intentions to engage in a behavior do not always predict actual behavior

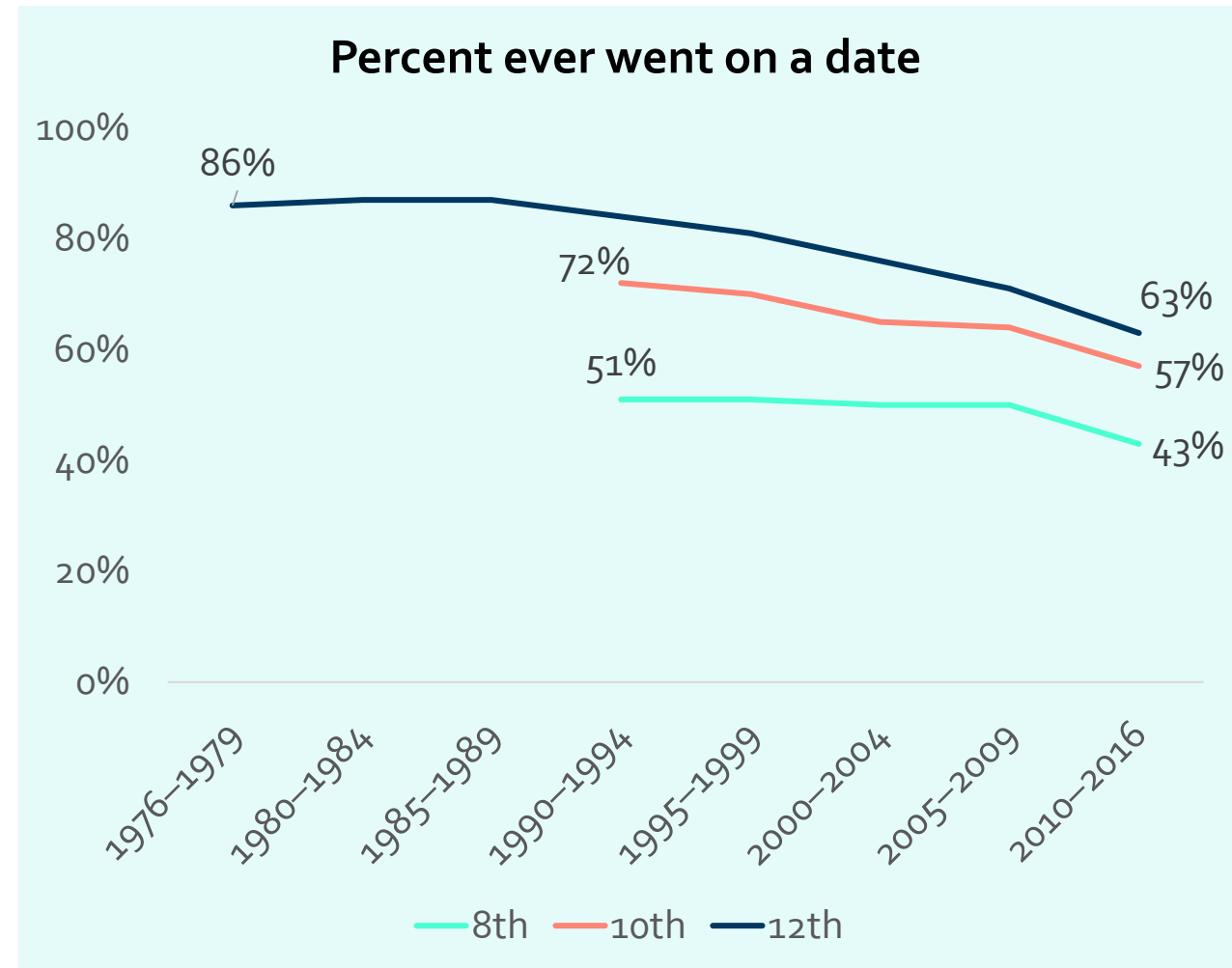
Relationship experiences

- Cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing are fairly rare during the teen years but becomes more common in the 20s
- Teens (and young adults) are spending more time outside of marriage than in the past



Relationship experiences

- The share of teens who have ever dated has declined over time
 - The decline may be exaggerated if teens do not use the term 'date' and so do not classify their behaviors as 'dating'
- Teens' dating activity increases with age
- Less research on dating relationships among teens than on their sexual activity
 - Teens are waiting longer to have sex, but by age 18, two thirds of teens have had sex



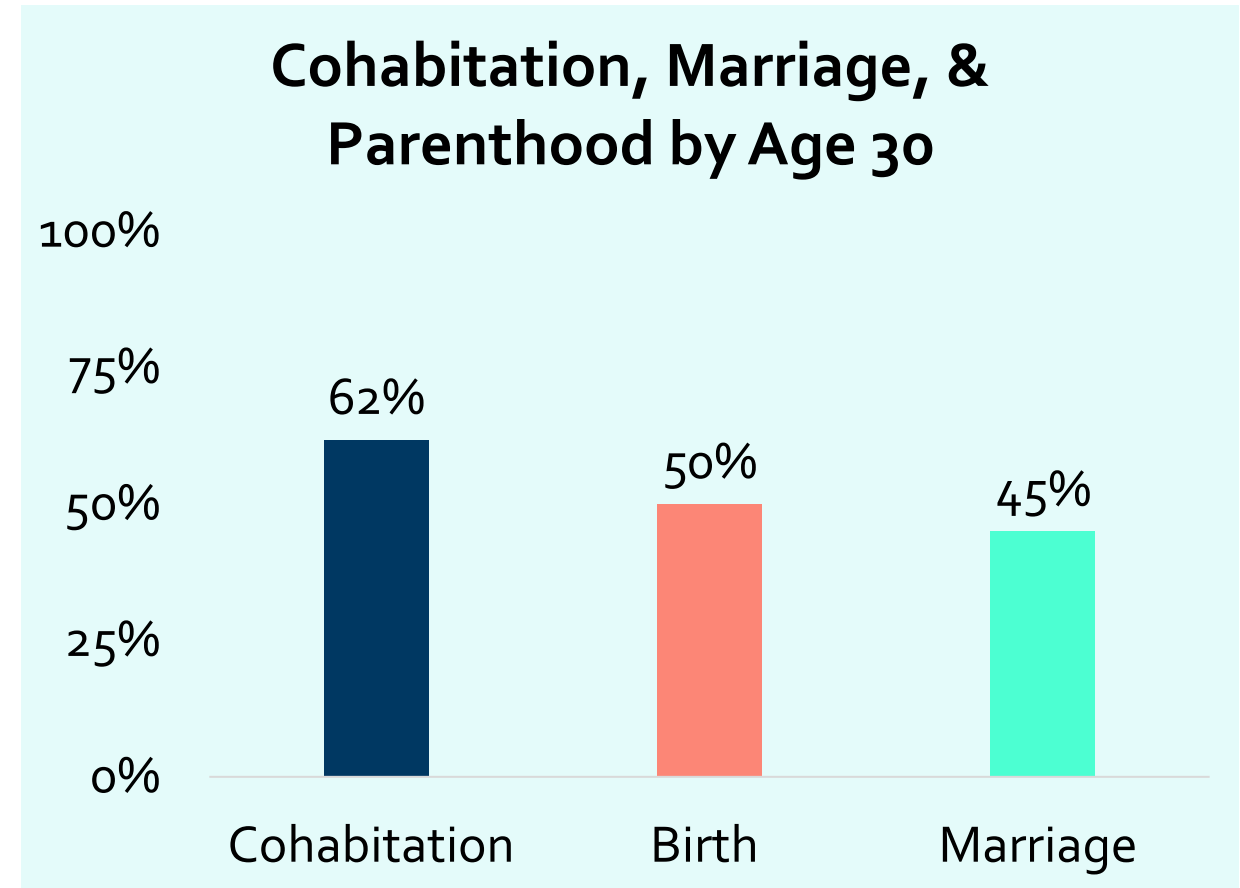
Source: Adapted from Twenge & Park, 2017. Using Monitoring the Future Data.

POLL

- Which term do you think teens are most likely to use to describe their romantic relationships?
 - Dating
 - Talking to
 - Hanging out with
 - Hooking up with

Relationship experiences

- Fairly little information on the prevalence of dating among those 20 or older
 - Most research pivots to cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing because these become more common by the end of the 20s



Source: NCFMR analyses of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 data

Relationship experiences

- Fewer teens are dating, and both dating and sexual activity are increasingly happening at later ages
- Still, the majority of teens have dated and/or had sex by age 18
- Language used to refer to relationships changes
- Less is known about the prevalence of dating experiences among those 20 and older, as coresidential relationships and parenthood become more common



Relationship quality

- Teens and young adults' relationships vary substantially by age
 - Developmentally normal for teens to have shorter, less committed, less stable relationships as they seek to balance interdependence and autonomy
- What aspects of relationship quality are relevant for adolescents and young adults?

Couple Interaction

- Affection
- Emotional Support
- Instrumental Support
- Coercion
- Controlling behavior
- Criticism

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Context

- Duration of relationship
- Expectations for the future (commitment)
- Union status (dating, cohabiting)

Primarily
among young
adults

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) emerges in adolescence, peaks in the early 20s, and declines in the late 20s

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While adolescent and young adult relationships vary in trajectories of stability and quality, most are not volatile

Relationship quality

- Research on A&YA romantic relationships often focus on the “bad” – instability, churning, IPV
- Most teen and young adult relationships tend to be either committed or exploratory
- Further, when these relationships dissolve, they do so for good reasons – adolescents and young adults break-up with partners when they are not fitting their relationship needs or expectations.

Relationship quality

Adolescent relationships are important

- Learning Curve - how to 'do' relationships
- Baggage – Trajectories of styles of relationships

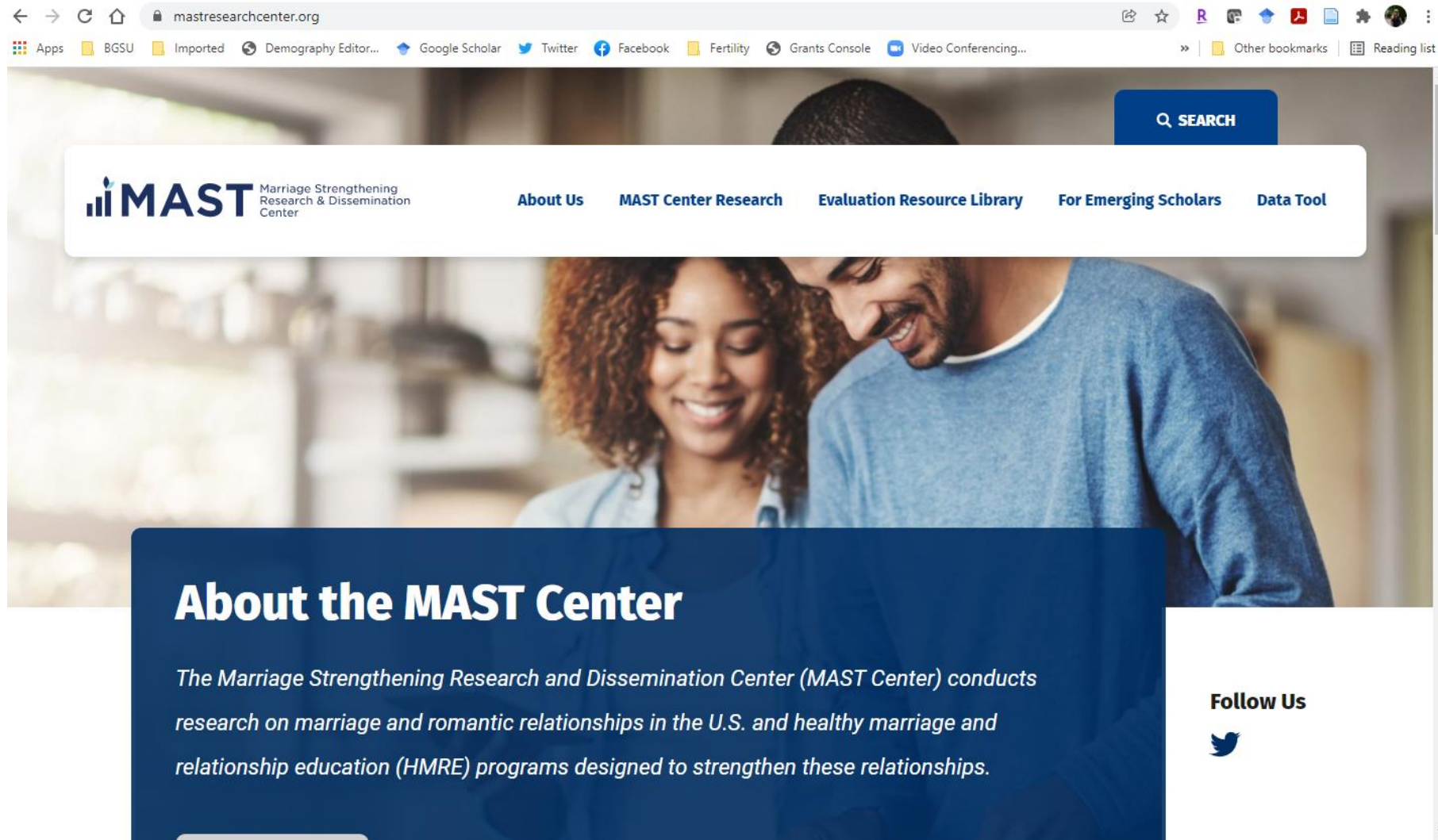


Implications

- HMRE programming focus on teaching young people how to avoid or exit unhealthy relationships in addition to how to build positive relationship skills
 - It is okay to leave a relationship that does not meet one's needs
 - When possible, consider how to identify and address unhealthy aspects of relationships
- Develop programs that are age-appropriate
- Avoid one-size-fits-all programming
 - Not all teens and young adults want to marry or have children

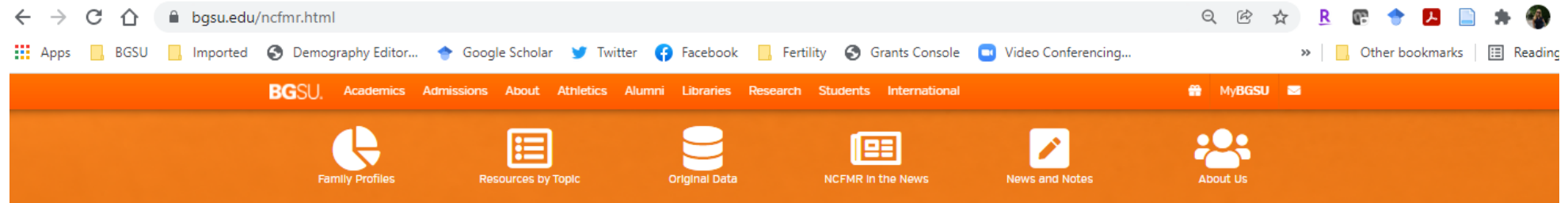
Visit the MAST Center for more resources

- Online: www.mastresearchcenter.org
- Twitter: [@MASTResearchCtr](https://twitter.com/MASTResearchCtr)



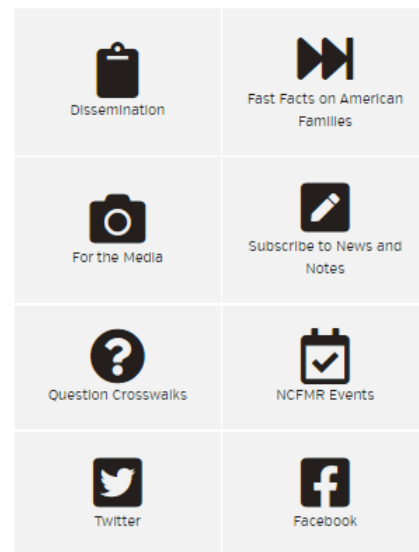
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National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR)

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The National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR) was established in 2007 to help improve our understanding of how family structure is linked to the health and well-being of children, adults, families, and communities and to inform policy development and programmatic responses.

This project is codirected by **Wendy D. Manning** and **Susan L. Brown** with assistance from Bowling Green State University. Support was also provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation from 2007 to 2013.

News and Stories



"There's no longer a single script for how we do marriage. We get married for our own personal happiness and fulfillment, and people define that in various ways."

--Susan L. Brown

Contact

THANK YOU!

PLEASE VISIT MAST CENTER:
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