



# DO CHILDREN MAKE A MARRIAGE UNHAPPY?

BY RICHARD B. MILLER

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A student once asked me, "Why would a couple want to have children when kids mess up a marriage so much?" He had just been exposed to the well-documented roller coaster of marital satisfaction reported in many textbooks on marriage and family life.<sup>1</sup> This roller coaster—an irregular V-shaped line (usually called the "U-shaped curve")—plots a significant decrease in marital satisfaction beginning early in marriage. Husbands' and wives' satisfaction with marriage appears to continue sliding downhill to the time when teenage children are at home. At that point in time, parents' satisfaction with their marriage apparently reaches its lowest point. Later, when children leave home, the curve turns dramatically upward, showing increased satisfaction with marriage.

One of the most widely cited studies supporting the research described above was published in 1983 by Olson and his colleagues. The study included couples at various stages of family life, but all the information was gathered at the same point in time. (This is called cross-sectional research.) So a couple whose oldest child was 4 years old filled out the same questionnaire in the same month as did another couple whose youngest child just left home. The graph they created to illustrate their findings (Figure 1, below) has been reproduced in several textbooks.

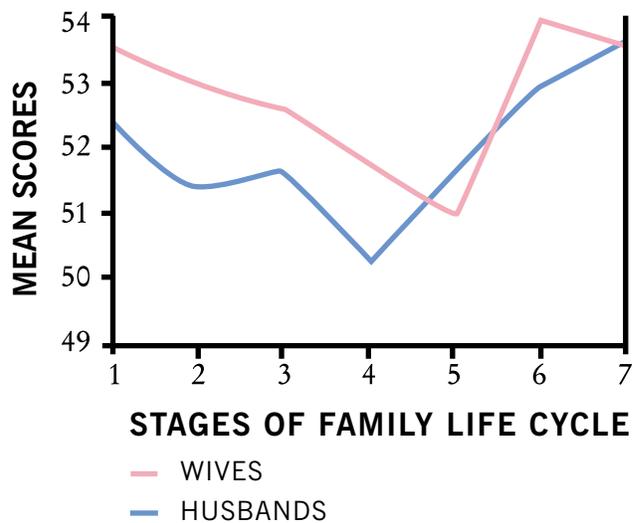


FIGURE 1: COMMONLY USED GRAPH INDICATING SATISFACTION WITH MARRIAGE OVER TIME<sup>2</sup>

*The stages of the "family life cycle" used by Olson, et al., and many other scholars are (1) couple without children, (2) couple with babies and preschoolers, (3) couple with school-age children, (4) couple with adolescent children, (5) couple "launching" children, (6) "empty nest" couple (no children at home), and (7) retired couple.<sup>3</sup>*

This generally accepted finding has led family scholars to conclude that this "roller coaster" of marital satisfaction is reality for the majority of marriages.<sup>4</sup> However, these conclusions are based on research not appropriate to the issue of marital satisfaction over the life span. Couples who have divorced are not part of the samples used in this research. Their absence causes the average scores to go "up" in the later stages of marriage for the remaining couples, because only the more satisfied, still-married couples are left to participate in the study. Thus, the U-shaped curve appears to take an upward turn.

It would be better to do longitudinal research, where the same couple would fill out a questionnaire every few years to measure how their attitudes and perceptions of family life change over time. Recent longitudinal research, which follows the same couples over a period of time, has raised some important questions about the U-shaped curve.

### "FAMILY LIFE CYCLE" LIMITS

The research that examines satisfaction with marriage over time, resulting in the U-shaped curve, uses the theory of a "family life cycle." The family life cycle theory assumes that families, like individuals, have predictable stages they go through. However, many scholars<sup>5</sup> criticize the use of a single life-cycle pattern to understand families in complex societies with various paths of family development. For example, single-parent families and

childless couples do not fit the stages of the family life cycle.<sup>6</sup> Also, the timing and order of family transitions do not always follow the so-called family life cycle. A couple may have several children, resulting in the theoretical presence of several stages of the family life cycle all at once. Thus, considering the variations in family structure and transitions, it is impractical and unwise to choose one pattern as the "normal" family life cycle.

Further, the stages are based primarily on parents and their childrearing responsibilities, ignoring other aspects of family members' lives, which raises questions about the conclusions drawn from the research.<sup>7</sup> Many other things, such as occupation,

extended family involvement, and physical and emotional changes in marriage partners are ignored as possible influences on marital development. In summary, the family life cycle only describes families with children and ignores influences on the family and its members not related to parenting and children. It cannot be used by itself to explain changes in satisfaction with marriage.

Despite these criticisms, the family life cycle idea remains popular. Almost every family studies textbook continues to use it as a central organizing theme.

### THE LONG RUN IS A GOOD RUN

Much of the information family life educators teach their high school and college students about the course of marital satisfaction over the family life cycle is misleading. One misconception that influences discussions about the U-shaped curve of marital satisfaction occurs because the steep, dramatic slopes on the graph mislead the student to believe that people experience steep, dramatic negative and then positive changes in satisfaction with marriage.

Even Olson, et al., whose graph of the pattern is often used as an illustration (see Figure 1), reported, "these differences in satisfaction levels are small" and "of little practical value."<sup>8</sup> The graph is scaled to emphasize the slopes: the range of the graph is only from 49 to 54. If the graph used the entire range of the marital satisfaction scale, the U-shaped curve would be much shallower—more like a dip in the road than a pothole. This is special-

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ly important considering that Olson, et al., found that a family's stage in the family life cycle explained only 1 percent of the couples' levels of marital satisfaction. The authors stress in their text that this is minimal. In spite of their words and in spite of the flawed use of a cross-sectional study, the graph has a dramatic visual impact. Many readers may be misled by the visual presentation despite explanations in the text.

### MARRIAGE SATISFACTION IS STURDY

A close examination of the more recent, longitudinal studies of marital satisfaction indicates that marriages experience modest, not dramatic, changes over time. For example, Kurdek's analysis of the first four years of marriage indicated that the average decrease in satisfaction with marriage among wives was 1.80 on a scale ranging from 0 to 50. Husbands in the study had an average decrease of 1.75 during the same time interval.<sup>9</sup> In another study, White and Edwards analyzed the impact on satisfaction with marriage of launching the last child. They found that, although the effect was statistically significant, it was only a 1.10 point increase on the marital happiness scale.<sup>10</sup> With the scale ranging from 11 to 33, an increase of 1.10 is extremely modest.

Using other methods, Johnson, et al., found that what a person said about his or her marriage at one point in time was highly correlated (.89 to .94 on a 1.00 scale) with what the same person said about his or her marriage at other points in time. Indeed, the levels of stability remained high, regardless of the length of marriage among the couples.<sup>11</sup>

A stable pattern of satisfaction with marriage over time seems to continue throughout the course of

marriage. Cole reported that the strongest predictor of satisfaction with marriage in later life is the couple's level of satisfaction in the early years of the marriage.<sup>12</sup> Satisfying relationships generally continue to be happy over the course of the marriage. These couples are able to adjust when

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they encounter transitions and stress, while maintaining a satisfaction with the marriage.

### CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory suggests that relationships have considerable continuity over time. When a marriage begins, the husband and wife each develop ways of relating and subjective evaluations of the relationship. Once these patterns are in place, the marriage develops a sense of equilibrium, or balance. The established patterns of relating and evaluation are remarkably unyielding to much change, even when stresses and new situations are introduced into the marriage. Significant transitions, such as the birth of a child, a child leaving home, or retirement may create some fluctuation in the marriage, but after a period of adjustment, the couple generally returns to their balanced patterns. Consequently, there is relative

stability and continuity in marriage over the life of the family.

Family systems theory contrasts to the family life cycle's focus on transitions and change. However, studies suggest that both perspectives offer insight into the course of satisfaction with marriage. Both stability and



change characterize marriages over time.<sup>13</sup> Family systems theory and the family life-cycle perspective complement each other to help us understand stability and change in satisfaction with marriage. Both theories help us understand why the changes are generally modest and why most marriages experience substantial continuity.

### DON'T BLAME THE KIDS

One of the most destructive, misleading characteristics of the research using the cross-sectional studies resulting in the U-shaped curve is that it attributes dramatic negative changes in marital satisfaction to changes in parenting responsibilities. As noted above, changes in satisfaction with marriage are small, not dramatic. And because the stages in the family life cycle are by definition linked to changes in the ages and activities of a couple's children, there is no other related event (much less cause) available to

explain the small changes in satisfaction with marriage.<sup>14</sup> The reasoning is circular—the child-related events in a couple's life are used both to define and explain their satisfaction with marriage.

Longitudinal studies suggest that the decline in satisfaction with marriage during the early years of the marriage is not caused by parenthood. Studies that include control groups generally have found no differences between couples making the transition to parenthood and comparable childless couples.<sup>15</sup> Rather, any increased marital dissatisfaction at the time the first child is born is most likely to be the result of issues that have existed since before the marriage, and not the result of the transition to parenthood.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, scholars commonly assume that the low points in the U-shaped curve are caused by the parental stresses of rearing adolescent children. However, evidence from research suggests that other factors, in addition to the presence of adolescents in the home, cause decreases in satisfaction with marriage during this time. Steinberg and Silverberg interviewed 129 couples twice over a year. They found that an emotionally distant relationship between a parent and a same-gender adolescent child at

the time of the first interview significantly predicted lower marital satisfaction at the time of the second interview. However, wives' concerns about personal midlife identity issues also predicted lower levels of marital satisfaction at the second interview. These findings suggest that parents' individual development also influences changes in the quality of marriage over the life course in important ways.<sup>17</sup> Cross-sectional research suggests that couples' employment and economic conditions also have an influence on satisfaction with marriage during this period of the family life cycle.<sup>18</sup>

The two studies that examine the "upturn" of the U-shaped curve<sup>19</sup> show some influence of "launching" children on satisfaction with marriage. However, no longitudinal research addresses other sources of change or influence on satisfaction with midlife marriages at the same time children are leaving home. Certainly we cannot attribute all of the modest changes in marital satisfaction to children moving out of the house.

### THE AVERAGE COUPLE ISN'T YOU

These findings, that the average marriage experiences a modest

decline in satisfaction during the first few years of marriage, regardless of parental status, suggest that there is a "duration effect." That is, there is a natural decline in reported satisfaction with marriage after the honeymoon. Perhaps greater familiarity with the spouse, which comes with extended interaction, leads to a more realistic appraisal of a partner's positive and negative behaviors and traits. Further, differences in expectations concerning marriage may lead to dissatisfaction. For various reasons, there is typically a small decline in a couple's evaluation of their relationship during the early years of marriage, regardless of their parenting status.

On the other hand, maybe you aren't the average couple. The U-shaped curve represents the average of all the people in the study. This means that there are probably some couples whose marital satisfaction goes up throughout their marriages. But the "averaging" done by the statistical procedures used doesn't show that.

### HOW PARENTS AND TEACHERS CAN HELP

Young people—especially those anticipating and preparing for marriage—seem to be unaware of the misinterpretations of the U-shaped curve of marital satisfaction. They may misinterpret the data and come to believe that children cause unhappiness for married couples. Parents can help



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**T**he early months and years of a marriage are crucial to developing a satisfying relationship.

## Having children does not harm your marriage in any significant way.

by assuring their children that they are loved and welcome as part of the family and are not responsible for any problems in their parents' marriage. Family life educators must fully understand flaws in interpretation of the U-shaped curve in order to provide a more complete picture to their students. Unfortunately, information contained in family textbooks and used uncritically by family life educators is likely to perpetuate misconceptions of the meaning of the U-shaped curve.

The implications of teaching the unsupported idea that children negatively affect their parents' happiness are significant. The idea that a decline in satisfaction with marriage is primarily due to becoming a parent can have a negative influence on couples' attitudes toward having children. Likewise, it would be unfortunate for young people to believe that the only cause of marital struggles during the middle years is the presence of adolescent children in the home. Such a conclusion uses the children as scapegoats while ignoring the many issues that face mid-life adults and mid-life marriages.

The findings that marriages are generally characterized by continuity, in addition to change, also have important implications for family life educators. The early months and years of a marriage are crucial to developing a satisfying relationship. These early ways of relating and the feelings and emotions that develop about the marriage become fairly set. Although it is important to teach students about the developmental

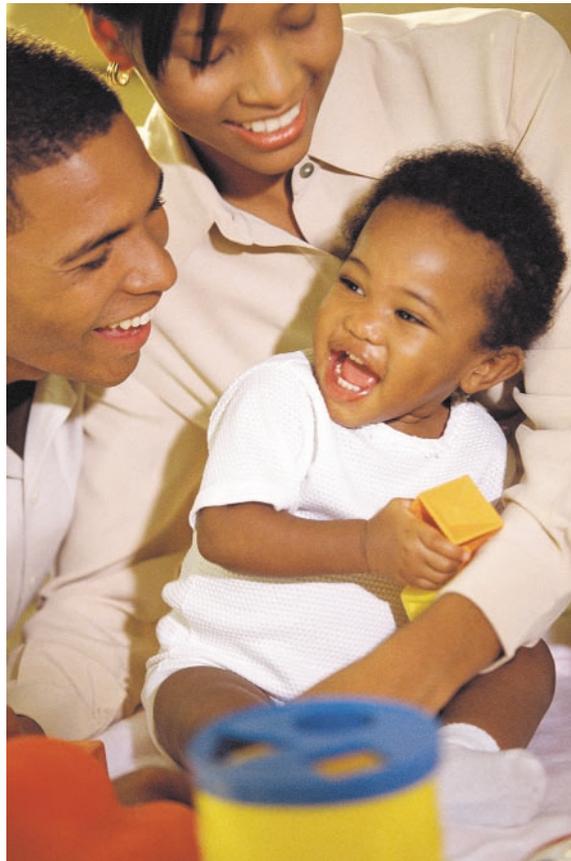


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stresses and challenges that require adjustments in marriage, the adjustments need to be placed in the context of a stable relationship. Most important, couples need to know that overall marital satisfaction in long-term marriages is mostly positive—the dips are not dramatic and wrenching, they are minor and gentle.

### CONCLUSION

Although the U-shaped curve represents the “average” of many people’s marital satisfaction, it doesn’t mean that couples are doomed to experience the same downs and ups in their marriages. Many marriages continuously get better throughout the marriage—even when children and teens are around. Research shows that

marriage satisfaction is generally quite stable over the life course, with only modest changes. Parenting responsibilities, especially during the early years of marriage, are not the primary cause of negative changes in satisfaction with marriage. In other words, having children does not harm your marriage in any significant way.

Clarifying these research findings will help teachers provide more accurate information to their students and, it is to be hoped, increase love in families as parents and children understand that children are not responsible for the quality of their parents’ relationship.

A couple can prepare for transitions and trials by forming positive ways of facing life together early in their marriage. Their positive approaches to marriage and to each other will lend stability and strength to the marriage throughout their lives. *mf*

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Changes in satisfaction with marriage are small, not dramatic.