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Healthy Transitions to Family Formation

ERIN KRAMER HOLMES, GEOFFREY BROWN, KEVIN SHAFER,
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▲ Introduction

Current demographic trends in the United States suggest that emerging adults delay marriage (Vespa, 2014), nonmarital cohabitation is the norm among this age group (National Marriage Project, 2012), and premarital sex—including noncommitted hooking up (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012)—is widely accepted (Pew Research Center, 2014). These trends collide with consistently high divorce rates (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010), where up to one-third of emerging adults grow up in stepfamilies (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Aside from high divorce rates, the United States is experiencing what some demographers term “the great crossover,” whereby unmarried parenthood is overtaking married parenthood (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014).

Despite these changes, however, 80% of emerging adults in the United States describe marriage as “an important part of their life plans,” with almost half of them labeling it as “very important” (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, & Kaye, 2013). Compared with their counterparts in Asia and Europe, emerging adults in the United States marry earlier (see United Nations, 2013). Despite some potentially discouraging trends, these data suggest that emerging adulthood is a valuable period for young men and young women to prepare for and form families of their own. In this chapter, we focus our attention on two features of family formation: preparing to build long-term partnerships, and preparing to become parents. As we explore these features, we pay special attention to dating and sexuality, cohabitation, growing up in a stepfamily, and transitioning to parenthood. Aside from exploring the diversity of growing up in a stepfamily, we also highlight differences by gender, race, and ethnicity (when available in the literature) that may better help us understand how a variety of emerging adults form families

and flourish in the process. We include directions for future research throughout the chapter.

▲ Finding a Partner: Dating and Sexuality in Emerging Adulthood

Family formation often begins with dating. We use the word “dating” to describe two individuals who have mutual romantic interest and whose commitment exceeds that of basic friendship, regardless of whether that commitment is implicit or explicit. Dating relationships are usually characterized by some amount of exclusivity, commitment, trust, and intimacy, although usually not to the level of cohabitation, engagement, or marriage (Givertz & Segrin, 2005; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Dating is an important step in the family formation process because it allows for an exploration of compatibility. Below, we briefly describe the dating process, and discuss sexuality in dating relationships.

▲ The Dating Process

“Traditional” dating involves one-on-one social interactions that allow two individuals to get acquainted, and to evaluate the potential for increased commitment. Yet what emerging adults consider dating might be changing (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Traditional dating is being supplemented by and, in some cases, replaced by other phenomena, such as hanging out, online dating, and hooking up (Bogle, 2007; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001).

Hanging out. Hanging out is becoming a more common alternative to traditional dating (Banker, Kaestle, & Allen, 2010; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), though it does not seem clear in the current literature whether or not hanging out is replacing traditional dating. Hanging out is when individuals spend uncommitted, unpaired, and loosely organized time together (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). According to emerging adults, hanging out helps them evaluate potential relationships, get to know a variety of other people, and pursue romantic interests (Banker et al., 2010). Unfortunately, little research examines the long-term role of hanging out in relationship formation. While emerging adults find meaning and purpose in it, more research is needed to determine

whether or not hanging out contributes to positive development. For example, does hanging out contribute to better social skills, better dating skills, greater identity of who a young adult is in his or her relationships, or what that person hopes for in a future dating partner? Further, very little is known about racial, ethnic, or economic diversity in hanging out. Are there differences by race, ethnicity, income, or gender?

Online dating. Online dating (including mobile apps) has become prevalent. From 23% to 33% of long-term relationships begin online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013). Though some worry that online dating is replacing one-on-one interaction, others suggest that online dating serves as a catalyst for traditional dating, with approximately 66% of online daters going on a date with someone they met online (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

But do online relationships last? While some found no difference in breakup rates or relationship satisfaction between online and non-online daters (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), others report that breakup rates are lower and marital satisfaction is actually higher for those who meet online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Again, more longitudinal research will help researchers uncover nuances in this phenomenon. From our review we conclude that online dating is a supplement to traditional dating and can play a valuable role in preparing for family formation.

Hooking up. While online dating and hanging out seem to supplement traditional dating among emerging adults, some ask: has dating been replaced by hooking up? Though both men and women report that they want more than just a sexual relationship in the dating process (Banker et al., 2010), there is little doubt that hooking up is a common feature of dating in emerging adulthood. Between 60 and 80% of emerging adults have had some sort of hook-up experience (Garcia et al., 2012; Goldberg, 2012).

Because the majority of emerging adults in the United States describe having a good marriage as “an important part of their life plans” (Hymowitz et al., 2013), we wonder how a hookup culture may facilitate or hinder emerging adults from building the long-term unions they hope for. In one sample, equal numbers of college-aged men and women reported that they hooked up with the goal of beginning a romantic relationship (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Others feel that casual sexual relationships have the potential to be less emotionally damaging than a bad romantic relationship (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010), or that they may allow one to grow closer to a friend without the

pressure of commitment (Bisson & Levine 2009). Though these findings give us some understanding of the purposes of hooking up, they do not connect relationship outcomes with sexual practices. Does hooking up help emerging adults achieve their goals?

To muddy the water further, the literature on the outcomes of hooking up or other casual sexual experiences is mixed (Claxton and van Dulmen, 2013). Hooking up has been associated with various negative outcomes, such as guilt and remorse (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010), more depressive symptoms, greater feelings of loneliness (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011), lower likelihood of condom use (Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012), a greater chance of contracting an STI (Heldman & Wade, 2010), and unwanted and/or nonconsensual sex (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). These negative outcomes suggest it may be wise for emerging adults to avoid the hook-up culture.

Emerging adults do report benefits, however, with 82% of men and 57% of women in one sample reporting they were happy they hooked up (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Others report feeling positive (Owen et al., 2010), desirable, pleased, and excited (Fielder & Carey, 2010).

Some of the mixed findings about hooking up are connected with gender (see also Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009). In the Add Health sample, hooking up was significantly less common among females (65.3%) than males (75.9%) (Goldberg, 2012), and in other studies women were more likely to prefer dating to hooking up (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010).

Unfortunately, little research addresses how the hook-up culture will facilitate or hamper emerging adults' long-term family formation goals. We found only two longitudinal studies to address this. Each reported that uncommitted sexual involvement was associated with lower satisfaction in future relationships (Paik, 2010; Willoughby, Carroll, & Busby, 2014).

Summary. In summary, dating during emerging adulthood is an important part of building long-term partnerships. Online dating is not replacing traditional dating, though much more research needs to be done on hanging out to better understand its role in family formation. Finally, while both benefits and costs have been associated with hooking up, for some emerging adults, the long-term relationship costs may outweigh the short-term benefits of hooking up. The mixed findings, and the preponderance of findings focusing solely on college students,

point to a need for more research on hooking up outside of the college context, and more longitudinal associations between hooking up and later relationship outcomes, such as stability, fidelity within a committed relationship, and relationship satisfaction.

▲ Sexuality in Dating Relationships

According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is a time for individuals to explore their sexuality and to form long-term sexual relationships. Much research exists on sexuality in emerging adulthood (see Halpern & Kaestle, 2014 for review). Though we already addressed casual sex (i.e., hooking up) above, we focus here on sexuality in the context of dating relationships. What aspects of those sexual relationships contribute to healthy family formation?

Sexuality in dating relationships has been associated with a variety of later relationship outcomes. For example, higher premarital sexual satisfaction was associated with relationship satisfaction, love, and commitment for both men and women, though the link between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction was stronger for men than for women (Sprecher, 2002). Sexual exclusivity is associated with marital quality and a reduced chance of marital dissolution. For example, women who had premarital sex with multiple partners had increased risk of marital dissolution compared with those who only had premarital sex with their future spouse (Teachman, 2003). Another study found that men and women who have premarital sex only with their future spouse reported higher levels of marital quality compared to those who had premarital sex with persons other than their spouse (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014).

Delaying premarital sex and abstaining altogether have also been associated with increased relationship satisfaction and stability, as well as improved relationship communication (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Willoughby & Vitas, 2012). Though we could not find nationally representative data about sexual timing in emerging adulthood, we found one report with a sample of over 10,000 emerging adults in the United States (Willoughby et al., 2014). In this report, 47.9% waited to have sex with their romantic partner “at least a few weeks” after they started dating, 35.5% had sex on the first date or within the first week, 9.9% had sex before the first date, and 6.6% abstained from sex with

their dating partner. This study replicated prior findings suggesting that delaying sex or abstaining from sex are associated with increased relationship stability, relationship satisfaction, and better communication (Willoughby et al., 2014). Thus, premarital sexual satisfaction and sexual exclusivity benefit relationships for couples who are sexually active; delaying or abstaining from sex also appear beneficial.

▲ The Role of Commitment in Building Long-Term Partnerships

Although various researchers have theorized about commitment in relationships (Johnson, 1999; Rusbult, 1980), Stanley and Markman (1992) specifically theorize about dating and emerging adulthood. According to Stanley and Markman, there are two types of commitment: personal dedication and constraint. Personal dedication refers to an individual's desire and efforts to maintain a relationship for both her or his own benefit as well as the benefit of the partner (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Constraint refers to influences and pressures that motivate individuals to maintain their relationship regardless of dedication because of consequences and difficulties they would encounter if the relationship ends (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2010). These constraints can be economic (e.g., sharing an apartment), social (e.g., pressure from friends or family to stay together), personal (e.g., having a child together), or psychological (e.g., emotional dependency).

These constraints lead to the phenomenon known as "inertia," or the tendency to stay in a current relationship because it is too costly to end it (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman, 2006). Due to inertia, Stanley et al. (2010) suggest that emerging adults date their partner for a while prior to increasing commitment to allow a couple to explore goodness-of-fit with each other *before* relationship inertia makes it too difficult to leave an unhealthy or poorly matched relationship. Others have come to the same conclusion. Between brief telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 college women, and in-depth interviews with a subsample of the same group, Glenn and Marquardt (2001) concluded,

Relationships between college women and men today are often characterized by either too little commitment or too much, leaving

women with few opportunities to explore the marriage worthiness of a variety of men before settling into a long-term commitment with one of them. (p. 4)

Differences between dating and cohabiting couples have also been empirically examined. In a comparison of 1,294 dating and cohabiting individuals, cohabiting individuals had more commitment and experienced lower levels of satisfaction in their current relationship than individuals who were dating. Using a subsample, the researchers then examined how those same relationship dynamics changed across the transition from dating to cohabitation. On average, respondents experienced a decrease in interpersonal commitment and relationship satisfaction after the transition to cohabitation, yet they experienced a significant increase in constraint commitment after the transition (Rhoades et al., 2012). The presence of lower levels of commitment during dating might be an important part of transitioning into long-term relationships. Limited levels of commitment and longer dating periods prior to cohabitation, engagement, or marriage may better allow emerging adults to evaluate compatibility with their partner and to escape the relationship inertia that makes it hard to leave bad relationships.

▲ Cohabitation

Moving toward long-term “dedication” commitment is a healthy and natural step for transitioning into long-term partnerships. One feature of this transition is deciding how to increase commitments that move emerging adults toward marriage. In this section we explore cohabitation as one of these steps by examining current demographic trends and motivations behind cohabitation. We end with a discussion about which types of premarital cohabitation appear better than others.

Demographic trends. Between 1995 and 2002, the prevalence of cohabitation increased from 48 to 60% among U.S. women (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Current estimates suggest that between 60 and 70% of male and female emerging adults are cohabiting (National Marriage Project, 2012). Estimates further suggest that cohabitation begins in early emerging adulthood with an average age of 21 for women and 23 for men (Hymowitz et al., 2013). Thus, many emerging adults cohabit to build long-term partnerships.

Motivations for cohabitation. As one would expect, results of a national survey of emerging adult cohabiters suggest that couples cohabit because they want to spend more time together (Rhoades et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2011). Qualitative focus groups give further insight into this motivation: spending more time together is not only about “time” but also about “deep feelings” of love for one’s partner (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch 2011).

Another motivation for cohabitation is pragmatic. For example, couples may move in together to share rent, the cost of food, cell phone bills, and other living expenses (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). These logistical concerns may not be intentional, and thus Manning and Smock (2005) and Stanley et al. (2006) refer to this process as “sliding” into cohabitation. That being said, not all emerging adults cohabit for pragmatic reasons or for love. There is a group of cohabiters who live together to increase commitment (13% of men and 16% of women), another to raise a child together (7% of men and 13% of women), another as a test for marriage with the hope of decreasing divorce (9% of men and 5% of women), and a small group who do not believe in marriage (.8% of men and .4% of women; see Stanley et al., 2011).

It is clear that the reasons for cohabitation vary. With this variation come questions about what the benefits versus risks of different types of cohabitation may be. Below we explore the mixed findings, with an eye toward understanding how the type of cohabitation gives us insight into flourishing versus floundering as emerging adults prepare to form families.

Cohabitation: Flourishing versus floundering. Longitudinal studies in U.S. samples found that couples who lived together prior to marriage had a higher risk for divorce, lower marital satisfaction, higher levels of domestic violence, and lower quality marital communication (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2009). Yet, other studies found that these negative effects exist primarily for serial cohabiters (see Teachman, 2003), those who cohabit because they are less sure of their compatibility (Brien, Lillard, & Stern, 2006), and those who unconsciously slide into cohabitation (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2010). In contrast, those who cohabit post-engagement or cohabit with the intent to marry their partner do not face the same risks (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006; Rhoades et al., 2012).

Summary. Cohabitation is a normative feature of emerging adulthood in the United States. Emerging adults who make intentional commitments to each other prior to cohabitation, including getting engaged to be married, seem to flourish. Those who engage in serial cohabitation, or who “slide” into cohabitation, may find themselves in riskier marriage circumstances. Although cohabitation is normative, so is marriage. The majority of emerging adults still value marriage above cohabitation (National Marriage Project, 2012). Emerging adults who move from cohabitation toward marriage still value the psychological sense of permanence associated with marriage (Arnett & Schwab, 2012) and the public and legal declaration of commitment (Cherlin, 2010), and they also feel social pressure from parents to marry rather than cohabit (Huang et al., 2011).

▲ Growing Up in a Stepfamily: Impact on Family Formation for Children of Divorce

Americans have one of the highest divorce rates in the world, with current estimates hovering around 50% (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). This means that at least one-third of American children, perhaps more, will live in a stepfamily before they turn 18 (Sweeney, 2010; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). As a result, many emerging adults are trying to make their own healthy transitions to family life having experienced significant family-of-origin transitions such as divorce, remarriage, and parental cohabitation (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Thus, stepfamilies are an important, but often overlooked, context for the development of emerging adults’ dating and marriage attitudes. Dating and marriage attitudes are correlated with relationship formation and subsequent marriage. For example, expected age of marriage, the importance of marriage, and the expectation to marry in early emerging adulthood were significantly associated with the probability of transitioning to marriage in young adulthood (Willoughby, 2014).

What factors associated with stepfamily life or the experience of parental divorce might impact the family formation attitudes of emerging adults? Taking our cues from the literature on divorce and remarriage, we examined stress associated with family transitions (e.g., Amato, 2010; King, 2006; Stewart, 2005; Sweeney, 2010), the quality of the relationships emerging adults have with their residential and

nonresidential biological parents (e.g., King, 2002; Jensen & Shafer, 2013), relationships with their residential stepparents (e.g., King, 2002; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), and the quality of the marriage between their residential biological and step-parent (e.g., Stewart, 2005). We report these results below.

▲ STEP: Stepfamily Experience Project

One problem in stepfamily research is that many data sets either lack questions about family formation attitudes or lack sufficient sample size to address variability in stepfamily experiences. We were able to address these two issues using data from the Stepfamily Experience Project (STEP), housed at Brigham Young University. STEP is a sample of more than 1,500 emerging adults who were raised in a stepfamily for at least one year between ages 8 and 18. We limited our sample to include only individuals whose parents divorced, leaving us with a final sample of 1,235. Using a national sample collected electronically through the Qualtrics opt-in panels (additional details on the sampling procedures can be found in Jensen, Shafer, & Holmes, 2015) we addressed how various aspects of the stepfamily relationship and parental divorce impacted attitudes about stepfamily formation. The descriptive statistics of our sample can be found in Table 4.1.

Independent variables: Stepfamily or divorce experience. We were interested in six aspects of the stepfamily or divorce experience of emerging adults. These included the perceived quality of the residential biological parent-stepparent relationship, stress caused by the stepfamily, and whether the respondent considered their stepfamily to be safe. Three questions addressed the divorce experience, including stress caused by the divorce, how hard it was to see their parents get divorced, and how relieved they were to see their parents divorce. Except for the stress variables, which were coded on a 1–10 scale, all variables were coded on a 1–5 scale. Higher scores on all variables indicated greater agreement with the statement.

Dependent variables: Attitudes about relationship formation. We considered four attitudes about family life as our dependent measures: *I feel a hindered ability to form relationships; I want a relationship like my biological parent and stepparent had; I think marriage is important; You should cohabit before marriage as a test.* These four variables were coded on a 1–5

TABLE 4.1. STEP Sample Characteristics for Dependent, Independent, and Control Variables

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Impaired ability to form relationships	1	5	2.68	1.37
Want relationship like bioparent and stepparent	1	5	2.67	1.41
Importance of marriage	1	5	3.20	1.24
Should cohabit as a test	1	5	3.94	1.09
Prepared for marriage	1	5	2.50	1.06
Bioparent-stepparent relationship quality	1	5	3.35	1.01
Divorce stress	1	10	5.57	3.13
Stepfamily stress	1	10	5.55	3.05
Stepfamily relationship was safe	1	5	3.26	1.21
Hard to see parents divorce	1	5	3.27	1.44
Relief to see parents divorce	1	5	2.51	1.25
R is female (vs. male)	0	1	0.55	
R's age	18	30	24.19	3.70
R had stepmother (vs. stepfather)	0	1	0.31	
Years in stepfamily	1	18	9.58	4.89
Catholic	0	1	0.23	
Other religion	0	1	0.10	
No religious affiliation	0	1	0.31	
Protestant	0	1	0.36	
<\$20,000	0	1	0.11	
\$20,000–\$40,000	0	1	0.29	
\$40,001–\$60,000	0	1	0.28	
\$60,001–\$80,000	0	1	0.17	
\$80,000–\$100,000	0	1	0.08	
>\$100,000	0	1	0.07	
Did not finish high school	0	1	0.08	
High school graduate	0	1	0.19	
Some college	0	1	0.51	
College graduate	0	1	0.22	
Currently married	0	1	0.28	
Currently cohabiting	0	1	0.17	
Seriously dating	0	1	0.18	

scale, with higher scores indicating greater agreement with the statement. We also considered the response to this question: *How prepared do you feel you are/were for marriage?* Answer options ranged from 1 = *very well prepared* to 4 = *not well prepared*. We also considered if the relationship between stepfamily/divorce experiences and family attitudes varied by gender. We controlled for potential confounds in our analysis, including respondent age, respondent had a residential stepmother (versus stepfather), respondent religion, respondent income, respondent education, and current relationship status.

Results. To analyze these data, we used ordered logistic regression, and performed the analyses in Stata version 13. Overall, perceived relationship quality between the biological parent and stepparent had the most substantial influence on relationship attitudes among emerging adult stepchildren (see Table 4.2). Agreeing that this was a good relationship was associated with a reduction in emerging adults' impairment to form a good romantic relationship, an increase in agreement that the respondent wanted a relationship like their stepparent and biological parent, and a greater impression of their preparation for marriage. Surprisingly, however, we also found a significant, positive relation between relationship quality and positive impressions of cohabitation. We speculate that this may be the result of seeing a positive new relationship in the context of a failed one (since the respondent's biological parents divorced). Other effects are worth noting. Stepfamily stress led to higher impaired ability to form good relationships and reduced the desire to have a relationship like the one between their biological parent and stepparent. We found the reverse of this trend among individuals who felt that their stepfamily relationship was a safe one.

Except in the case of feeling relieved that one's parents divorced, we saw few effects of divorce itself. Divorce stress was only associated with perceived relationship formation impairment, and even then the effect was not large. Respondents who felt that it was difficult to see their parents get divorced were less likely to want a relationship like the one between their biological parent and stepparent. Perhaps most interesting was the effect of feeling relief from divorce. Those who felt relief when their parents divorced reported that they were more impaired in their ability to form relationships, but also said that they wanted a relationship like the one between their biological parent and stepparent, and were prepared for marriage.

Summary. Stepfamilies are an important but often overlooked context for the development of emerging adults' dating and marriage attitudes. Seeing a positive remarriage relationship, feeling that one's stepfamily was safe, and feeling relieved that a bad parental marriage ended in divorce were important to emerging adults' views about marriage and cohabitation. More scholars invested in emerging adults' transitions to family formation ought to explore stepfamily experiences.

▲ Becoming Parents

A discussion of transitions to healthy family formation would be incomplete without an overview of the transition to parenthood. In the following section, we review research on demographic trends, preparing for parenthood, sharing child-care responsibilities, and caring for personal mental and physical health. Because research has elucidated some key differences (and similarities) between men's and women's adjustment and adaptation to parenthood, we also highlight gender differences.

▲ Context: Demographic Trends in Transitions to Parenthood

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the average age of first-time parenthood for U.S. women is 26.3 years, and for U.S. men it is 27.4 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). In 2013, 51.2% of women in the EU gave birth to their first child during their twenties (Statistical Office of the European Communities, 2015). Clearly, emerging adults are becoming parents; however, little emerging adulthood research focuses on becoming parents. For this reason, we have specifically selected articles whose samples include emerging adults, though not all articles limited their sample only to emerging adults. We emphasize that this brief literature review is meant to spark future research, and to help scholars think not only about emerging adulthood, but also about how emerging adults transition to adulthood.

It is also important to note that the demographic context for becoming a parent is different than it was in prior generations. One of the most important shifts in the United States has been termed "the great

crossover” (Curtin et al., 2014). This crossover means that the median age at first birth for women is lower than the median age for marriage; 40.6% of first births in the United States are to unmarried women (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2015). Though these mothers are not married, many of them are in cohabiting partnerships (Manning, 2015). There are clear social class and race differences through this crossover, with Latina and African American women significantly more likely than Asian and white women to become mothers prior to marriage (Martin et al., 2015). Further, women with less than a college degree are significantly more likely to have a child outside of marriage than women with a college degree (Hymowitz et al., 2013). Aside from these descriptive statistics, little is known about the attitudes of emerging adults toward childbearing and childrearing, how becoming a parent prior to marriage impacts the developmental trajectories of women and men, or what features of the transition to parenthood will help emerging adults continue to flourish well into adulthood. Scholars will fill key gaps in the literature when they explore the stability of cohabiting partnerships with children, the likelihood of these partnerships turning into marriages, and the stressors individuals and couples face when they transition to parenthood prior to marriage.

▲ Prebirth Preparations for Parenthood

For many mothers the transition to parenthood is normative and expected (Dye, 2010). Most expectant mothers feel supported during pregnancy (Deave & Johnson, 2008), and they alter their goals to include childrearing (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Saisto, & Halmesmaki, 2000). In contrast, fathers’ prenatal preparation for parenting appears to be more context-dependent (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Adamsons, 2013). Fathers take longer than mothers to adjust to the idea of becoming a parent (Lemmer, 1987), and they report feeling less prepared for the transition to parenthood than mothers (May & Fletcher, 2013). Importantly, those fathers that *are* involved prenatally, regardless of income and race, go on to show higher levels of engagement in many areas of their children’s lives (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008; Fagan, 2014; Tamis-LeMonda, Kahana-Kolman, & Yoshikawa, 2009; Zvara, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013), thus supporting the notion that the transition to parenthood begins before the birth of the child.

▲ Sharing Child-Care Responsibilities

The vast majority of mothers are highly involved in childrearing, beginning in early infancy (e.g., Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013). Although fathers today are generally more involved than were fathers of past generations (Pleck, 2010), fathers still have more discretion about whether and how to be involved in the lives of their infants than do mothers, and they choose to enact their parenting roles in many different ways (Brown, McBride, Bost, & Shin, 2011; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Thus, fathers typically report lower parenting self-efficacy than mothers when the child is in infancy (Hudson, Elek, & Fleck, 2001), and are generally less involved in the early years of the child's life than mothers (Lang et al., 2014; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Furthermore, parents' gender-role attitudes tend to become more traditional following the birth of a child, with women's attitudes changing more than men's attitudes (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). Thus, gender differences in parental involvement may to some extent reflect differential changes in gender role attitudes and behaviors across the transition to parenthood.

▲ Mental and Physical Health

The transition to parenthood has implications for parents' own health. Indeed, much work has documented the presence of postpartum depressive symptoms in new mothers (e.g., Gotlib, Whiffen, Mount, Milne, & Cordy, 1989; O'Hara & Swain, 1996; Wisner et al., 2013). Although fathers have been largely excluded from this work (Holmes, Sasaki, & Hazen, 2013), meta-analyses indicate that approximately 10% of fathers suffer from postpartum depression, a rate only slightly lower than new mothers (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010).

Although parents often experience health problems in the early years related to sleep deprivation and a lack of time or energy to tend to their own health (e.g., Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010; Teti, Crosby, McDaniel, Shimizu, & Whitesell, 2015), parenting also brings a host of beneficial consequences for mental and physical health (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). Recent evidence indicates that parents

report being happier than nonparents, with fathers being happiest of all (Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomurski, 2013). In the long term, parenthood appears to be largely beneficial, with both mothers and fathers ultimately showing increased intrapersonal development, social connectedness, civic engagement, and reductions in health risk behaviors (Eggebeen, Knoester, & McDaniel, 2013; Garfield, Isacco, & Bartlo, 2010; Bartlett, 2004). Overall, most research suggests that both negative and positive health changes appear to affect men and women relatively equally (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014).

Importantly, there is some indication that the effects of parenthood on male emerging adults' health and health-related behaviors may be moderated by contextual variables. Although fathers overall appear to benefit from becoming parents, these effects may be limited to older fathers who are married or cohabiting with the child's mother (e.g., Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010). For example, fathers of newborns who are not in romantic relationships with their child's mother are at greater risk for depression and substance use (Huang & Warner, 2005). Moreover, for men (but not women) who become parents prematurely (i.e., before 20 years of age), the transition to parenthood is a risk factor that is associated with higher levels of problematic gambling (Lee, Storr, Ialongo, & Martins, 2013) and alcohol consumption (Christie-Mizell & Peralta, 2009; Little, Handley, Leuthe, & Chassin, 2009). Thus, becoming a parent after age 20 may reduce health risk behaviors among many young men.

▲ Directions for Future Research

One of our tasks in this volume was to explore diversity among emerging adults in the family formation process. In this chapter, we point to specific patterns of racial, gender, and ethnic diversity when explored in the literature, but were surprised to discover just how little literature there is on these forms of diversity. Researchers must work harder to obtain samples that better represent the full range of emerging adults' experiences.

Another of our tasks was to explore the literature on family formation, particularly research focused on preparing for long-term partnerships and preparing to become parents. The literature clearly demonstrates that emerging adults value committed relationships and

marriage. Traditional dating, hanging out, online dating, and casual sexual encounters are all included among the things emerging adults do along the path to commitment and marriage. Yet more research is needed to determine whether or not hanging out contributes to positive development in emerging adulthood. For example, does hanging out contribute to better social skills, better dating skills, or greater relational identity? How do trends in online dating, hanging out, hooking up, or other casual sexual experiences contribute to or detract from helping emerging adults know what they hope for in a future dating partner?

Further, we found few studies regarding dating and sexuality practices that focused on noncollege samples, no longitudinal evaluations of early dating practices and later family formation trajectories, and no studies focused on the second half of emerging adulthood (perhaps ages 25–29). It would be very valuable to see how dating practices early in emerging adulthood prepare youths for the types of families they hope to create. We also encourage scholars to consider whether or not the types of dating practices young emerging adults engage in would be valuable for older emerging adults, or whether or not there ought to be some developmental advancement in the approach one takes to dating and sexuality that can move youths closer to their marriage and family goals.

The mixed findings, and the preponderance of findings focusing solely on college students, point to a need for more research on hooking up outside of the college context, and more longitudinal associations between hooking up and later relationship outcomes, such as stability, fidelity within a committed relationship, and relationship satisfaction.

Finally, we found the least literature focused on the transition to parenthood. This was surprising given data that clearly demonstrate emerging adults are becoming parents. What developmental steps are emerging adults taking to prepare themselves for parenthood? What gender differences may exist between young men's preparations and young women's preparations? Is there an optimal age at which an individual should become a parent? Are there differences between young emerging adults who become parents and their older counterparts (either older emerging adults or adults) in relationship stability, relationship satisfaction, individual development, or career development? These comparisons would contribute a great deal to our understanding of emerging adults' transition to parenthood.

▲ Conclusion

In conclusion, how do emerging adults transition to healthy family formation in the context of so many demographic changes to the American family? First, traditional and online dating appear to be good ways to meet a potential partner, test compatibility, and move toward more dedicated commitments to a long-term partnership. In long-term dating partnerships, sexual satisfaction and sexual exclusivity were also associated with positive relationship development and stability. It is valuable to note that emerging adults who chose to delay or abstain from sex prior to marriage appear to have the same benefits. It is still unclear, however, how hanging out and hooking up contribute to or detract from these processes. More longitudinal research will be important for answering these questions and dealing with mixed findings.

Second, while longitudinal research established many risks associated with premarital cohabitation over marriage, selection effects appear to account for many of these differences. Couples who cohabit following a serious dedication commitment, such as an engagement or a mutual intent to marry, fare better than those who cohabit for other reasons.

Third, stepfamilies are an important, but often overlooked, context for the development of emerging adults' dating and marriage attitudes. Seeing a positive remarriage relationship, feeling that one's stepfamily was safe, and feeling relieved that a bad parental marriage ended in divorce were important to emerging adults' views about marriage and cohabitation.

Fourth, the transition to parenthood brings about other important changes for emerging adults who are forming families, and this transition begins prenatally. Though fathers still have more discretion in the time they spend with infants than mothers do, many fathers and mothers are sharing responsibilities for infant care. Concerns about mental and physical well-being, particularly over depressive symptoms, should focus on fathers as well as mothers, because both experience postpartum depression at relatively similar rates.

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