

Marriage Improves After Kids Leave Home: Study

By Josh D. Simon

Staying together for the sake of the kids may take on a new significance, thanks to a 2008 University of California (UC) study* that suggests marriage improves once kids leave the nest.

The UC Berkeley Institute of Personality & Social Research Study followed 100 women participants through various stages of life — early marriage, child-rearing, and (quite often) divorce and remarriage/new domestic partnership — and asked them to identify their levels of marital satisfaction.

While individual responses depicted a normal and rather predictable “up and down” pattern throughout these life stages, researchers discovered an illuminating trend when looking at the results as a whole: as children grew up and left home, the women — when viewed as a group — admitted to being more satisfied with their marriages.

This begs the dramatic question: does the very experience of having and raising children imperil an otherwise happy marriage? Thankfully, according to study leader and UC Berkeley psychology Ph.D. candidate Sara Gorchoff, the answer is no — or, at least, *not really*.

Gorchoff suggests that the issue here is not actually about having or raising children in-and-of-itself, but the fact that, with kids around, spouses typically spend less quality time with each other — which diminishes marital satisfaction.

To that end, Gorchoff says: “The take-home message [of this study] for couples with young children is, ‘Hang in there.’” Study co-author Oliver John goes a bit further and offers this to married couples with at-home children of any age: “Don’t wait until your kids leave home to schedule quality time with your partner.”

It’s good advice and makes “common sense.” But given the everyday sacrifices of having and raising children, and the inevitable strain it puts on parents’ precious limited time for each other, is it practical?

The answer to this still eludes us. However, the fact that we’re now in a position to intelligently ask it is a testament to the illuminating nature of this study. Doubtless — and thankfully — there will be many more to come. ■

* Read the UC Berkley Press Release of the study here: www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2008/12/03_marriage.shtml

