

# Five Research-Based Ways to Build Resilient Families in 2019

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A new year means a fresh start, and most of us are probably glad to see 2018—with its ongoing political rancor and endless sexual abuse scandals—go. Of course, a new year also means another list of resolutions that we hope we will be able to keep, including our goals for healthier families.

In addition to publishing original research, the Institute for Family Studies also strives to break down research findings from other scholars and experts in a way that individuals, couples, and parents can easily use to strengthen families in their own homes and communities. As we begin 2019, we thought it would be helpful to summarize a few of the lessons we've learned about marriage and family life from the research we covered in 2018—findings that we can all use to help us create a healthier family culture this year. While we certainly could have included a much longer list, here are five research-based ways for married and single individuals to help build more resilient families in 2019 and beyond.

## **1. For those who are single, remember that what happens *before* marriage affects later marital quality.**

“Marriage effects start long before a couple walks down the aisle,” IFS senior fellow Scott Stanley wrote in a [blog post](#) last year. In an article on [marriage preparation](#), BYU professor Jason Carroll expounded on this theme noting that “the promoted path many young adults are pursuing in an effort to be better prepared for a lasting marriage is actually producing the opposite of what they intend,” including behaviors such as delaying marriage longer, casual sex, and cohabitation. When it comes to sex, Nicholas Wolfinger showed in [an IFS research brief](#) on sexual history and marital happiness that a “surprisingly large number of Americans reporting one, lifetime sex partner have the happiest marriages.” And despite cohabitation becoming more [pervasive](#), Dr. Stanley and Galena Rhoades [explained](#) that cohabiting before marriage is still linked to higher odds of divorce.

## **2. If you are not yet married, resist the cohabiting parenthood trend because marriage is still the best place to raise kids.**

As IFS senior fellow W. Bradford Wilcox put it in the IFS blog's first [interactive blog post](#), “despite the increasing popularity of cohabiting parenthood, cohabitation still doesn't measure up to marriage, especially for children.” Wilcox offered 10 reasons to delay parenthood until marriage, including that married parents are [more likely than cohabiting parents to stay married](#), that marriage does the [best job of binding fathers to their kids](#), and that kids raised in married-parent families are [less likely to experience poverty](#).

## **3. Married couples—stay the course because marriage tends to improve with time.**

Over the past year, we've highlighted the marital wisdom of several long-time married celebrities and national leaders, including [Michelle Obama](#), [Ali Wentworth](#), [Billy and Ruth Graham](#), [Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), and [Barbara Bush](#). Much of their advice was similar: work on your marriage if you want it to last, and, as Billy Graham [said](#) of his 63-year union to Ruth, "[marriage] gets better as you get older."

That marriage gets better with time for couples willing to put in the effort is more than just wisdom from couples who have been married a long time; it's also the key finding of a [recent study](#) led by Dr. Paul Amato and Professor Spencer James, which we [featured](#) here. Their research found that although marital happiness tends to decline in the early years of marriage, for *most* married couples, marital happiness, along with shared activities, improves after about 20 years for those who stay married, while marital discord improves continuously over time. "When couples stick together through difficult times, remain faithful to one another, and actively work to resolve problems," Dr. Amato shared [in an IFS interview](#), "positive long-term outcomes (while not guaranteed) are common." Because many of us come from broken families with divorced parents, Professor D. Scott Sibley offered some [encouraging advice](#) for those seeking to overcome the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

#### **4. Parents: give children less screen time and more opportunities for good, old-fashioned play.**

Without a doubt, one of the greatest challenges for parents today is the ongoing battle over screen time. We've published several blog posts highlighting the increasing body of research on the negative effects of too much screen time, such as [posts](#) featuring Naomi Schaefer Riley's latest book, [Be the Parent, Please](#).

One of the leading researchers on the effects of screen time on teen mental health is Professor Jean Twenge, the author of [iGen](#). Her research, which we [featured in a recent blog post](#), indicates that:

*children and teens who spent more time on screens were lower in psychological well-being: They were less curious and more easily distracted, and had a more difficult time making friends, managing their anger and finishing tasks. Teens who spent an excessive amount of time on screens were twice as likely to have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression.*

Dr. Twenge has urged the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to update its guidelines on screen time for younger children to include older teens. For its part, the AAP recently issued a new clinical report, which we [highlighted here](#), that advises less screen time for kids and encourages pediatricians to "[write a prescription for play](#)" for the parents of young children. The AAP notes that unstructured play is the best kind of activity for children, specifically play that involves traditional toys, is rough-and-tumble, takes place with peers and alone, and involves make-believe.

To help parents do a better job of limiting screen time for the entire family (and have more time for unstructured play), Andy Crouch, author of [The Tech-Wise Family](#), shared some helpful tips in this IFS [interview](#). Additionally, Justin Coulson [offered suggestions](#) on how to establish healthy family screen time habits.

## **5. Finally, don't overlook the power of faith for individuals and families.**

One of my personal favorite pieces of research that we published in 2018 emphasized the power of prayer for stronger families. For example, a recent study from researchers at Brigham Young University revealed that shared prayer may benefit families in similar ways that previous research has shown prayer to benefit couples. Exciting new research from Professor Tyler J. VanderWheele and Ying Chen of Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program found that prayer and religious service attendance during childhood are linked to healthier life choices and better mental, physical, and emotional well-being in adolescents and young adults. In a blog post explaining the findings, Dr. VanderWheele said that "parents who bring up their children religiously can be reassured that, on average at least, they are creating important psychological and behavioral health benefits that their children will carry with them into adulthood."

As we look to the new year with hope and anticipation for all it may hold, let's take these five research findings and share them in our own families and communities as we strive to build healthier and more resilient families for the future.

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