

101 Ideas to Improve America's Marriage Index Score

by David Blankenhorn & Linda Malone-Colón from the Institute for American Values' Marriage Index, A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators

The Marriage Index study is available at: www.americanvalues.org

1. Make the issue of reuniting fathers and children a top priority through programs of advocacy, family reconciliation, and community mobilization.
2. Create a council in your community that seeks to strengthen marriage and family life.
3. Make raising children who succeed in marriage at least as important a goal as raising children who succeed in careers.
4. If your marriage has recovered from serious trouble, consider volunteering in (or starting!) a marriage mentoring program in your community.
5. Write to your local officials and ask them to create a vision statement for your community about how to strengthen marriage and increase the proportion of children who live with their own married parents.
6. Be intentional about talking to your teenagers about marriage.
7. Encourage young people to see dating within the context of courtship, where courtship is defined as "finding and winning the right person for marriage."
8. Recognize that older adults, including parents, teachers, college professors and administrators, should have important roles in guiding the courting practices of the young.
9. Parents, in particular, should encourage their adult children to make the commitment of marriage to the loves of their lives—assuming that the partners are mature and responsible.
10. If your children do get married, offer to help support them while they get settled.
11. Public and private organizations could launch a public health campaign to alert the public to the central role that active and affectionate fathers play in protecting their children from neglect and abuse.
12. Create pro-marriage public service announcements, including those with celebrity spokespersons.
13. Determine the value of marriage for different subsets of the population — who benefits most from marriage and how do they benefit?
14. Develop a research-informed definition of marital success and examine the processes of marital success within different subsets of the population.
15. Evaluate the effectiveness of community-wide coalitions and programs, especially by tracking "hard" measures such as divorce rates, tax dollars saved, and decreased absenteeism at work.
16. Develop and evaluate comprehensive youth programs that include character development, relationship and communication skills, partner selection skills, realistic marriage expectations, and common problems and solutions in marriage.
17. Pay special attention to the needs of youth who are at risk because of a "poverty of connections."
18. Reclaim the ideal of marital permanence and affirm marriage as the preeminent environment for childrearing.
19. Avoid the mistake of equating marriage with concepts such as "committed relationships" which have no institutional embodiment.
20. Community organizers, veterans of the civil rights movement and poor people's movement, and others could create a broad new populist movement to empower marriage and families in their communities.
21. Strive to develop neighborhoods which are stable and supportive of family life. The ecology of safe, child-supportive, and marriage friendly neighborhoods

needs to be appreciated and protected at least as much as does the ecology of natural environments.

22. Especially in urban America, develop economic strategies aimed at providing more job opportunities for young males, especially poorly educated minority males, since jobless young men are less likely to marry and are less desirable as marriage partners.
23. Establish community outreach programs to involve fathers in caring for their children and the mothers of their children, knowing that the reason to strengthen the paternal role is to foster marriage, not to foster substitutes for marriage.
24. Link advocacy for children to advocacy for marriage. While advocating better programs for children, also insist that no children's program, however well-funded and well-designed, can or ought to substitute for a stably married two-parent home.
25. Develop mentoring programs to encourage young scholars, especially scholars of color, to see the importance of marriage and to develop the skills for conducting high-quality research.
26. Make current marriage research databases more widely available to scholars and researchers in training.
27. Develop better strategies for translating and disseminating basic and applied research findings to leaders of civil society and the general public.
28. Scholars and others should consider revising their methodology in order to include families in the definition of civil society.
29. Develop strategies that will result in more and broader segments of the U.S. population seeking marriage education and marriage therapy/counseling.
30. Determine the long-term effectiveness of current marriage education programs, especially for divorce prevention.
31. Determine the active ingredients in effective marriage education programs in order to define the core information and skills that should be included in every program.
32. Promote education for successful marriage as a regular part of school curricula. Include understanding of the historical roots of marriage, its desirability as an environment for childrearing, and its psychological, moral, legal, and economic requirements.
33. Develop better procedures whereby parents can be informed about, and have some input into, what teachers are teaching children about marriage, procreation, and family life.
34. High school textbooks, when talking about marriage, should make character education a master theme, rather than framing it only in terms of health.
35. Educators should consider teaching about marriage and love through great works of literature, art, and scholarship that examine these themes.
36. Begin a national conversation about Black marriages.
37. Excite and mobilize Black intellectual leaders, community activists, and institutions (particularly Black churches and colleges) around the goal of strengthening Black marriages.
38. Develop better knowledge about marriage formation and marriage success in communities of color.
39. Make marriage education widely available to all couples who seek it, with a special focus on low-income communities and communities of color.
40. Develop and disseminate effective, research-based marriage preparation and enhancement programs suited for culturally diverse and low-income communities.
41. Require all engaged couples in your congregation to participate in a theologically-informed and research-informed marriage preparation program.

42. Incorporate marriage mentoring, including lay marriage mentoring, as a regular part of congregational life.
43. Enlist more clergy as leaders for marriage in all communities, including the African American community and other communities of color.
44. Organize religious congregations into Community Marriage Policies and other community partnerships for offering premarital and marriage education and for speaking with a common voice for marriage.
45. Churches should join with government, the market, and other institutions of civil society to launch a constructive critique of media images of marriage and family.
46. Churches should retrieve, in a critical manner, their marriage and family traditions.
47. Churches should help society understand that public policy should not and cannot maintain “value neutrality” on family matters.
48. Convey to all members of your congregation that marriage is not just a private matter, but an accountable promise before God and the faith community.
49. Create a national Interfaith Council on Marriage devoted to strengthening marriage in U.S. houses of worship and in the nation.
50. Youth pastors should help to reconnect marriage and childbearing in the minds of young people.
51. Divinity schools and other institutes that train clergy should incorporate the best scholarship on marriage and families into their training programs.
52. For every grant or charitable gift aimed at ameliorating the harmful impact of family fragmentation on children and on society, offer another aimed at strengthening marriage.
53. Congress should pass a resolution stating that the first question of policy makers regarding all proposed domestic legislation is whether it will strengthen or weaken the institution of marriage.
54. Work with state legislators to win passage of new laws offering financial and other incentives, such as reduced marriage license fees, tax credits, and shorter waiting periods, to couples who choose to participate in pre-marriage education.
55. Work with members of Congress to win passage of legislation increasing federal funding for marriage education and support programs serving low-income communities.
56. Work with state and local officials, educators, and others to create policies adding high-quality marriage and relationship education to the public school curriculum.
57. Work with state legislators to reduce unnecessary divorce by reforming divorce laws, primarily by combining longer waiting periods for divorce with stronger provisions for family courts to refer couples to marriage education.
58. Encourage policy makers to provide pilot-project funding for community marriage initiatives.
59. Make the case for linking marriage and two-parent families to the public policy goals of reducing poverty and increasing child wellbeing.
60. Make the case that supporting marriage can reduce the public costs connected to income support and social service programs.
61. Measure the effects of public policy and public opinion on the stability and quality of marriage.
62. End marriage penalties for low-income Americans by guaranteeing that any low-income couple who suffers a financial loss due to the decision to marry (usually through the loss of benefits) is legally entitled to a payment or tax credit from the federal government equal to the amount of the loss.

63. Create a blue-ribbon Commission on Marriage charged with leading a civil, serious public conversation about the meaning and possible future of marriage in the U.S. and establishing national goals for improving our Leading Marriage Indicators.
64. Create social security and other tax benefits for a parent who wants to stay home and care for young children.
65. Create new educational credits or vouchers, to be used for high school, vocational, college, graduate, or postgraduate education, available to parents who leave the paid labor force for a period of time to care for their children.
66. Add a marriage message to teen-pregnancy prevention programs, educating teenagers about how marriage is the best context in which to raise children.
67. Increase the Child Tax Credit from \$1,000 to \$5,000 per child.
68. Reform housing policies to promote family formation by developing pilot projects within public housing to allow married fathers of welfare-receiving families to live in public housing with their families without a rental surcharge for up to 18 months.
69. Recognize that high rates of family fragmentation impose extraordinary costs on taxpayers and that reducing those costs through state and federal marriage-strengthening programs is a legitimate concern of government.
70. Increase public scrutiny and regulation of the fertility industry.
71. Create forums for thoughtful examination of the various possible legal and public policy solutions to the issue of same-sex unions, evaluating each proposed solution according to whether it would be likely to help or hurt the goal of strengthening marriage.
72. Integrate marriage education into the programs offered by family courts.
73. Reform court-connected divorce education and mediation programs so that they seek to facilitate reconciliations, rather than merely expedite the divorce process.
74. Fund evaluation research to see which divorce education programs meet the goal of both reducing divorce acrimony *and* preventing unnecessary divorce.
75. Offer (or mandate) a remarriage and stepfamily education workshop for couples where one or both parties have a child from a previous relationship.
76. Create a one- or two-year waiting period for unilateral divorce.
77. Protect the legal boundaries of marriage, clearly distinguishing married couples from other personal relations.
78. In law and policy, including tax policy, treat the married couple as a social, legal, and financial unit.
79. Inform members of the legal profession about developments in the social sciences and in marriage education indicating that we as a society can and should reduce divorce and unmarried parenthood.
80. Lead a dialogue about possible pro-marriage legal reforms, including covenant marriage, collaborative divorce, making mutual consent the basis for divorce in long-term marriages and marriages with children, and requiring counseling before granting divorces in these situations.
81. Expand children's rights to include the right to a natural biological heritage (a father's sperm and a mother's egg) and the right to know their biological parents.
82. Reassess current trends in family law, in such areas as child custody, adoption, and divorce, with an eye toward promoting marital and childrearing stability.
83. The National Center for Health Statistics, the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute for Mental Health, and state public health departments should

make collecting and analyzing data on marriage and divorce an important priority.

84. Fundamentally reassess the current state-federal Child Support Enforcement Program, seeking whenever possible to foster not simply more child support but also more marriage and more fatherhood.
85. The President of the United States should issue a brief annual report to the nation on the state of fatherhood and marriage.
86. Expand graduate and postgraduate training opportunities in marital therapy.
87. Encourage consumers to ask therapists to declare their value positions with regard to marital commitment.
88. Educate the therapeutic community on the benefits of marriage and work to improve negative professional attitudes toward marriage.
89. Create visible communities of therapists who are pro-marriage and who are developing educational models for working with distressed couples.
90. Family therapists and counselors should help couples identify the likely pressure points in a marriage, such as the birth of a first child, and guide them toward the steps that can help their marriage.
91. In educational textbooks and other scholarly work, treat marriage as a basic societal institution with many dimensions, rather than examining marriage only, or mainly, from a psychological or therapeutic perspective.
92. Encourage your medical facility to offer marriage and parenting education programs such as “Boot Camp for New Dads” or the “Becoming Parents Program.”
93. For married couples with children at home, aim for an overall commitment to paid employment that does not exceed sixty hours per week.
94. Create personnel policies and work environments that respect and favor the marital commitment.
95. Assure employees that they won’t lose their place on the corporate ladder if they take family leave.
96. Create personnel policies and work environments that permit parents to spend more time with their children. For instance, job protection and other benefits for short term (up to six months) parental leave, and job preferences and other benefits, such as graduated re-entry and educational and training benefits, for long-term (up to five years) parental leave.
97. Reduce the practice of continually uprooting and relocating married couples with children.
98. Encourage journalism on marriage and family life as a professional specialty and as a track for advancement.
99. For editors of popular magazines and websites aimed at teenage girls and teenage boys, realize that many teenagers are intensely interested in thinking about the kind of person they might marry, and that they would enjoy and benefit from good articles about marriage.
100. Media organizations should use their power to promote positive images of men and fatherhood, especially in Black America.
101. Love your spouse and children, or encourage someone else who’s married to love their spouse and children!

**These 101 ideas are offered by David Blankenhorn and Linda Malone-Colón, and do not necessarily represent the views of the scholarly contributors to this Marriage Index.*