

Shacking up doesn't mean growing up

By Derek Miedema, published January 6, 2011

Most parents want to see their children grow up to find a place of their own, a fulfilling career, and a stable relationship.

Today it seems our kids are taking longer to get there. Statistics show kids today are taking longer than 50 years ago to reach these milestones, but much the same as 100 years ago, with one exception: Cohabitation is replacing marriage and this delays the transition to adulthood.

There are four common markers of the transition to adulthood: Leaving home, finding work, getting married and having kids. Certainly, life circumstances in the early 1900s were very different from today, but between then and now the ages at which kids leave home, find work, get married and even, to a certain extent, have kids, are quite similar.

Where there are differences, there are typically solid reasons. Today's job market, for example, makes it difficult to find decent work without more and more education. The loss of blue-collar jobs and the invention of contract employment mean it's harder for someone to find a job without a college or university degree. The need to spend thousands of dollars and additional years in college also means that adolescents are staying home later than they were a few decades ago.

One major change in life habits is that young people are living together (cohabiting), before marriage or instead of marriage altogether. And this delays adulthood in concrete and practical ways. Living together is not marriage -- it is less stable. Forty years of Statistics Canada data confirm this. Starting your first relationship in a common-law arrangement means your relationship is almost twice as likely to break down as one where the couple waits till after marriage to live together. And if you live in a common-law relationship and eventually get married, the odds are still the same. When it comes to marriage, a test drive seems to weaken the relationship.

When a couple slides into living together, eventually deciding it's just cheaper to share a place, that's a mile away from standing in front of witnesses and publicly vowing to spend the rest of your life together. Cohabiting couples are often less intentional about moving in together and having kids, and the option to leave commonly remains on the table for at least one partner. As a result, cohabitation tends to mean more serious attempts at relationships in a lifetime (which means more heartache in search of "the one"). While relationship breakdown is quite common these days, it remains true that 90 per cent of teenagers desire to have one partner for life and get married. Because cohabiting relationships break up with greater frequency, that goal is delayed.

So how does this affect becoming an adult? With marriage comes the final commitment to whatever life brings, for better or worse. Returning to the traditional markers of adulthood, you've probably noticed that living together isn't on the list, likely because it typically delays marriage. And subsequent delays in having children due to relationship instability put off the sudden adulthood that's part and parcel of parenthood.

In a way, cohabitation draws out the process of finding a lifelong mate, so that the process of negotiating the dating world is stretched ever further into adulthood. As renowned sociologist Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University writes: "The journey from adolescence to adulthood, so clear at mid-century, is now a long slog filled with choices. Even in mid-life, choice continues: Am I satisfied with my marriage? Should I consider ending it? If I am divorced, should I marry again?" In short, this is the academic version of the catchy Clash song: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The reality is that living together does not offer the same stability as marriage, even considering higher marital breakdown rates today.

Derek Miedema is the author of the recent paper "[Growing Up Then and Now: Cohabitation Marks the Key Difference](#)," published by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (imfcanada.org).