

It's Too Easy to Get Married!

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as told to Lester and Irene David

I ENJOY a beautiful June wedding as much as the next woman. But I'm afraid all the lovely sentiment surrounding such occasions can't make me forget that too many brides and bridegrooms don't live happily ever after.

During the past 30 years, I have counseled more than 6,000 couples, and I know what tragic heartaches lie behind those impersonal statistics that tell of 395,000 divorces each year.

Everyone agrees something ought to be done about this pressing social problem. Yet most people ignore a basic cause of the trouble—the fact that *getting married is too easy*.

Marriage is an enormously complex relationship. Our licensing laws, however, ignore the complexity. They make marriage so easy that many people slide into it without being properly equipped for the long and difficult job of building a lasting, loving union. Something is wrong when it is easier to get married than to obtain a driver's license.

About half the states require short waiting periods averaging only three days before a marriage license can be issued—and 20 stipulate no delay. Most states require applicants to pass a blood test showing freedom from venereal disease—but six states don't even ask for that.

Age requirements have risen somewhat, but they still are shockingly low. Six states permit girls to marry at 14 with parental consent, eight others at 15, and the rest at 16. Age limits for boys range from 15 to 18, with the consent of their parents.

Why are easy marriages so hazardous? There are four main reasons:

1. People marry without thinking ahead to problems that may arise and thus are totally unprepared to cope with them.

The short waiting period in most states prevents "quickie" marriages, but it doesn't stop the "semiquickies," which are becoming more common in these tense times.

The experience of two 19-year-olds is typical. They had dated regularly for six months. One day they visited a newly married couple, heard rapturous stories of their happiness—and, on the way home, decided to take the step, too.

In two weeks they were married, but within six months they were miserable. A baby was on the way, and the young man, who had aspired to be a lawyer, was forced to quit school. His hopes for a career were shattered, and he took out his resentment on his wife. They had waited

A noted authority on family relations warns:
too-early, too-hasty marriages turn the road to romance into a dead-end street



as long as the law required, but it was too short a time for a thorough evaluation of all the possible problems a marriage can bring.

2. People marry without a basic understanding of their obligations and responsibilities.

I recently talked to a 34-year-old businessman who was having explosive quarrels with his wife. They had married less than a year before. His reason for waiting so long? "I was too busy building a business."

About all he knew of marriage—and I mean this quite literally—was that two persons live together as man and wife! He continued his absorption in his work, conducting his life exactly as he did while single. He offered his wife little time, less consideration, and virtually no tenderness and affection. Small wonder she rebelled!

3. People select partners for wrong reasons.

I know a young couple who were happily in love for a year, but in all that time never really knew one another. She was impressed with his looks and his humor; he was "just wild about her" and looked no more deeply.

He didn't realize his future wife hated housework; she was unaware he would keep tight hold of the family purse strings. After marriage,

they came to realize these things about each other—and bitter disillusionment set in.

4. People marry when still too young physically and emotionally.

Some persons in their late teens can be mature and responsible enough to build fine lives together. But can the same be said for youngsters of 14 and 15?

Children of that age simply haven't lived long enough to make a success of marriage and parenthood. Yet tens of thousands of babies are born each year to boys and girls in their teens. In most cases, the fathers leave school to take jobs, but they are untrained for anything but the lowest-paid positions. Without further education, their futures—as well as the futures of their children—are dismal.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION to this problem of too-easy, too-early marriages?

Change the laws? In a free society, we must guard against violating the individual's right of privacy. So we cannot drastically alter regulations except where a change is obviously needed for the protection of the individual and society.

One change, however, is not only clearly permissible but urgently needed. That is to raise the age limit to a more sensible level, even with parental consent. The minimum marriage age should be 17 for girls and 18 for boys.

State officials also might re-examine their waiting-period laws and ask themselves: would a longer period afford young people time to have marriage-saving second thoughts?

But altering regulations is only part of the answer. The rest must come from ourselves by way of the home, the schools, the churches. Parents should impress upon children the importance of marriage so that they will grow up with the firm conviction that matrimony requires careful thought and preparation. Our schools and churches should offer detailed courses in marriage and family relationships. Some are now being given, but they reach only a few.

I recall one young man who spent a winter taking a course on how to operate a small boat he intended buying in the spring for his honeymoon. But he never thought to learn anything about marriage—which has storms just as dangerous as any he would encounter in his boat!

Too many young people are walking into marriage the same way. I am convinced that, to strengthen our family life and lower our appalling divorce rate, we must teach them that marriage licenses should not be bought as casually as postage stamps across a counter.

COVER:

This dramatic photo by Carroll Seghers II suggests a grand idea for Father's Day—a father-son fishing jaunt. Fishermen just abound in one Oklahoma family. See p. 6.

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