

# The Success Sequence for Health I



Utah Marriage  
Commission  
at Utah State University

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# IMPORTANT NOTE

This lesson was developed by the Utah Marriage Commission in collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education in response to the passing of **Utah House Bill 281**, requiring that the Success Sequence be taught in Utah middle and high school health classes. This requirement will go into effect for the 2026-2027 school year.

The Success Sequence, as defined in H.B. 281, is “a three-prong framework for youth and young adults that encourages:

- i. completing at least a high school education and pursuing further educational opportunities
- ii. obtaining full-time employment; and
- iii. having children within a healthy and stable family and marriage.”

*The Success Sequence for Health I* is intended to serve as a drop-in lesson for Utah teachers to assist them in presenting the Success Sequence in a way that fulfills this requirement in addition to teaching positive decision-making skills within the context of healthy relationships.

The lesson is adapted from a full-length curriculum entitled *Love Notes: Relationship Skills for Love, Life, and Work*, and was developed with full permission from the original author, Marline E. Pearson, M.A.

If you have any questions regarding the development of this curriculum or its content, please contact Rian Gordon at the Utah Marriage Commission, [rian.gordon@usu.edu](mailto:rian.gordon@usu.edu), or visit [strongermarriage.org](http://strongermarriage.org).

# The Success Sequence for Health I

## Lesson Goals

1. Describe the Success Sequence and explain how completing education, securing employment, and marrying before having children can increase the likelihood of future relationship (and financial) stability.
2. Explain how to apply decision-making strategies—such as the “Decide, Don’t Slide” approach—to current and future relationship and life choices.
3. Help students identify specific personal goals and steps they can take to align their current choices with their desired future, including family, education, and career outcomes.

## Materials Included in Lesson Plan

### Handouts

- *Making Decisions* Worksheet (one for each student)
- *My Success Plans* Worksheet (one for each student)

### Media

- Success Sequence PowerPoint Slides
- Institute for Family Studies “[His Story](#)” Video

### Additional Materials

- Glitter bottle: Small clear water bottle filled with 4 different colors of glitter and filled an inch from the top with water.

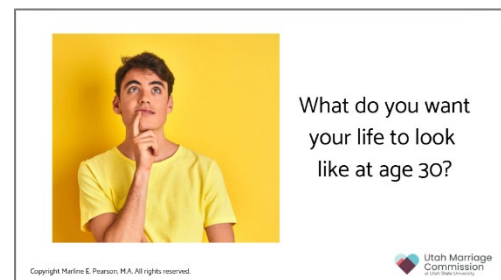
## Introduction

# Your Future: What Do You Want?

**(PP)** The lesson begins by inviting students to reflect on their own personal hopes, dreams, and goals for their future. This immediately engages participants and encourages them to apply the following principles to their lives and individual circumstances.



- ❖ *Today we're going to focus on your future. Research has revealed that there are specific pathways to follow towards success that are more likely to get you there.*
- ❖ *Before I share with you these "secret ingredients for success," Let's talk about your own personal hopes, dreams, and goals.*
- ❖ **(PP)** *Imagine yourself at age 30. Go ahead and close your eyes, if you want. What kind of life do you hope you have? What kind of relationship? Income/lifestyle? Family? Give students 30 seconds or so to envision.*
- ❖ *Let's open our eyes. Would a few of you mind sharing? What did you see? Pause for a few responses.*



**Instructor Note:** Students may share different visions, but you will likely notice some common themes such as stability, love, and purpose. Examples could include having a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, having a good marriage, having a good income, having a happy family, etc.

- ❖ *Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts. Now, not everyone has the same dreams for their future, and that's okay! The important thing to recognize is that regardless of where you hope to wind up, you are building your future **right now** with the choices you are making. The more intentional we are about those choices, the more likely we are to create the life we want.*
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## Section 1.1

# Decide, Don't Slide!

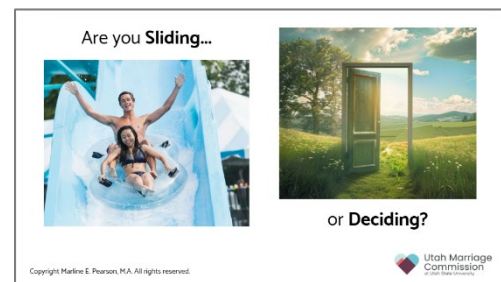
This section introduces the important concept: **Decide, Don't Slide**. This concept is an essential piece of following success pathways to build teens' sense of control and self-determination and to empower them to shape the future they envision for themselves.

❖ *Let's discuss this a little more in-depth. I want to introduce you to a concept called Decide, Don't Slide.<sup>1</sup>*

- *By **sliding**, I mean just going along in life and kind of just letting things happen.*
- ***Deciding**, on the other hand, is about being intentional, gathering information, making clear decisions, and then taking steps to get to where you want to go. This can be applied to lots of things in life.*

❖ *(PP) When we slide into our choices without stopping to think ahead, we run the risk of winding up in places we never planned to be—sometimes with some serious high-cost consequences.*

❖ *On the other hand, when we make intentional choices that align with our personal goals rather than just letting things happen to us, it opens up our options for the future. Deciding is a much safer way to go when it comes to important things that can be life-altering, like finishing high school, preparing for a career, or starting a family.*



## Sliding and Deciding in Relationships

- ❖ *You can think of sliding and deciding in terms of physical health choices. For instance, if you just go with the flow and don't really make a strong decision to exercise and be physically active, you might end up with health problems down the road that make life less enjoyable.*
- ❖ *But let's take a look, for example, at how this works in relationship health, specifically in our romantic relationships. This is one area where deciding rather than sliding can make a big difference.*

- ❖ **(PP)** *How many of you know someone one who got romantically involved with another person and then later regretted it? Allow for raise of hands.*

- ❖ *Or someone who stayed way too long in a bad relationship?*

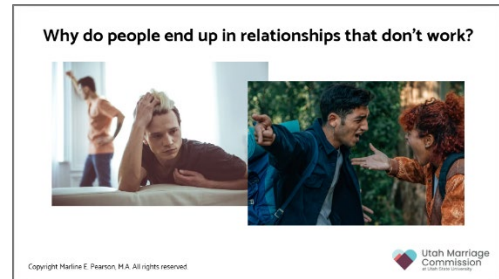
- ❖ *Like, “What was I thinking? Why did I ever get involved with this person?”*

- ❖ *Do you know anyone who found themselves in a complicated relationship—an unhealthy, maybe even an abusive relationship?*

- ❖ *Have you ever wondered why this happens? Certainly no one goes into a relationship wanting it to be bad or painful.*

- ❖ **(PP)** *When you first start to feel attracted to someone, your brain triggers a very real chemical reaction in your body by releasing a flood of hormones.*

- ❖ *These hormones produce great feelings and energy—even euphoria. It may feel like all you can think about is this person. But this surge of hormones can also cloud your judgement. It takes a while for this “chemical mix” to settle a bit before you’ll see a person more clearly—usually somewhere between 3-9 months.*



Shake a glitter bottle.

- ❖ *It’s like this at the start—exciting, glittering, beautiful—but you can’t see through it clearly. This is why someone (maybe your friend or a sibling) could be falling for a total loser—or someone who is just all wrong for them—and they just can’t see it. “Oh, he or she is different with me,” or “They’ll change for me, I just know it. They’re a really great person underneath.”*
- ❖ *But if you put the glitter bottle down and let it settle for a while, you’ll see more clearly.*
- ❖ *When a person “slides” quickly into getting involved with someone—especially physically involved—before learning more about who that person really is, it*

*increases their chances of winding up in a relationship that doesn't work out or has more serious consequences.*

- ❖ *That's why, with our attractions, it's so important to slow down, wait for the glitter to settle, and decide on the next step instead of just sliding into it.*
- ❖ *What's a time you or someone you know slid into a relationship situation that didn't turn out well? What could have made it different? Discuss 2-3 examples from the class.*

**Instructor Note:** Consider having one personal example ready to share to get the discussion going.

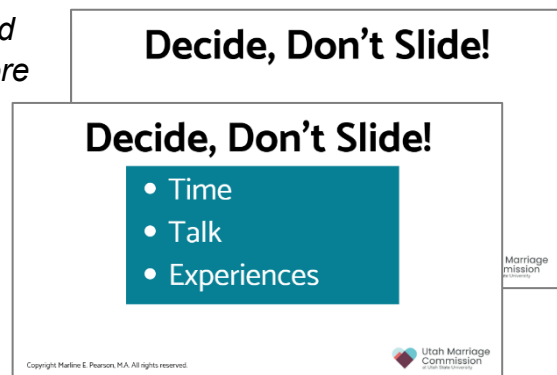
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## Section 1.2

# Another Way: Informed Decision-Making

This section builds on the concept of Decide, Don't Slide! and introduces a more intentional and positive way students can approach decisions related to relationships and their future.

- ❖ *Sliding through big decisions may feel easier in the moment—but it often leads to consequences we don't expect. So what can we do instead?*
- ❖ **(PP)** *Choosing to decide—to pause, plan, and act with intention—gives us more control, more freedom, and a better shot at the life and relationships we actually want.*
- ❖ **(PP)** *In your relationships, deciding looks like taking **time** to learn about a person before getting romantically involved. You are much less likely to slide into something unhealthy if you take things slow!*
- ❖ *It looks like being willing to **talk**—having lots of honest conversations together to find out what you have in common, to learn how you communicate, and to see how each of you handles your emotions.*



- ❖ *It looks like intentionally creating a lot of **experiences** together in different situations to see who a person really is; to learn about their character and values and level of maturity. To discover if you really enjoy each other.*
- ❖ **(PP)** *Essentially, making good decisions—in our relationships and in any other important part of our life—requires **good information**. The more you learn about your options, the more intentional you can be about choosing a path that aligns with your goals and avoiding those that don't.*

## Decide, Don't Slide!

- Time
- Talk
- Experiences

Good decisions require good information.

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## Activity: Making Decisions

- ❖ **(PP)** *Let's explore this concept with an activity.*
- ❖ *On your handout is a list of some of the things a person can make decisions about rather than just sliding. You'll see there is an emphasis on relationships.*
- ❖ *Decisions you make in this part of your lives can be as important (as consequential) as those you make regarding your education and career.*

### Decisions You Can Make...



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### Directions:

- ❖ *As I read aloud the list on p. 1 of your handout, check the ones that might be important for a person to make a decision about now or in the future.*
- ❖ *Now, choose one of them to focus on for the next step. Once you have chosen, keep that item in mind. Go to the next page. There you will see a long list of possible things that might help a person making decisions—things to find out or do.*
- ❖ *I will read the list. As I do, check any items that you feel might help you make that decision. Check as many as you think can help.*

### To process:

1. First, ask participants to count up and then call out how many items they checked for their chosen decision.

2. Then, ask a volunteer to pick one item they feel is important for people to make a decision on rather than sliding.
3. Then ask all participants to call out items from the list that they think could help a person make that decision.

### Activity De-Brief

- ❖ *Goals and dreams are not realized magically in real life. You need to make real decisions. And to make good decisions, you need information—you need to find things out.*
- 

## Section 1.3

# Pathways & Sequences Toward Success

(PP) This section will introduce the Success Sequence and will briefly review the research illustrating how it impacts finances and relationships.

- ❖ *Now that you understand the importance of making intentional, informed decisions, and how to make those decisions for yourself, let's circle back to your vision for your future. I want to ask about some of your specific expectations for your own life:*



1. *When you think about your future adult life, how many of you expect or desire to have children someday and provide them with a stable family life—parents who stay together in a satisfying, loving relationship? Pause for show of hands.*
2. *When you think about your future adult life, how many of you expect or hope to have enough money to live on? To avoid being poor? To live a comfortable middle-class life? Pause for show of hands.*

**Instructor Note:** While you can expect everyone to say they want financial wellbeing for their futures, you will have a greater diversity with the first expectation question. Acknowledge the fact that while everyone wants to avoid poverty in adulthood, not everyone expects/desires to have children.

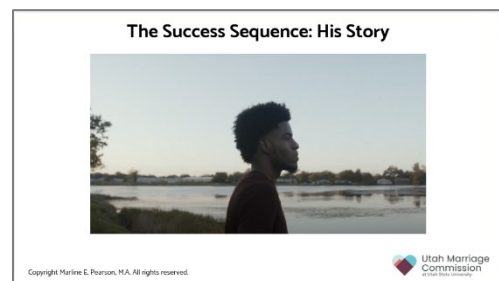
- ❖ *Thanks for sharing your expectations.*
  - *Do you have any ideas of what things a person can do to up their chances of achieving one or both of these expectations? Pause for brief responses.*

- ❖ *If you hope to have a middle-class income or higher and avoid being poor by the time you're in your 30s, research has shown that achieving certain combinations of life's big milestones can increase your odds.<sup>2</sup>*
- ❖ *They may also be associated with either increasing or decreasing your chances of family stability by your 30s.<sup>3</sup>*
- ❖ *In other words, success doesn't happen by accident. It happens when people make intentional decisions (remember deciding rather than sliding?) that help them hit a few key milestones—and often, the order or sequence matters too. Let's take a look at what these steps are, and how they can shape your future.*

## Media Opportunity – *His Story* Video

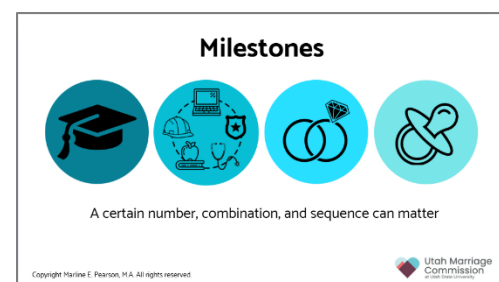
- ❖ **(PP)** *We're going to watch a short video that will introduce these steps with a real-life example. Let's see if our instincts were correct.*

**Instructor Note:** This video is part of a series produced by the Institute for Family Studies featuring the stories of real young adults who are seeking to follow a success pathway and sequence or working on getting back on track. In this video, Scott, who became a father as a teenager, struggles to get back on track for his sons. Keenan, a high school student, explains his plan to follow the success sequence—focusing on his education and career preparation—and plan to be married before starting a family.



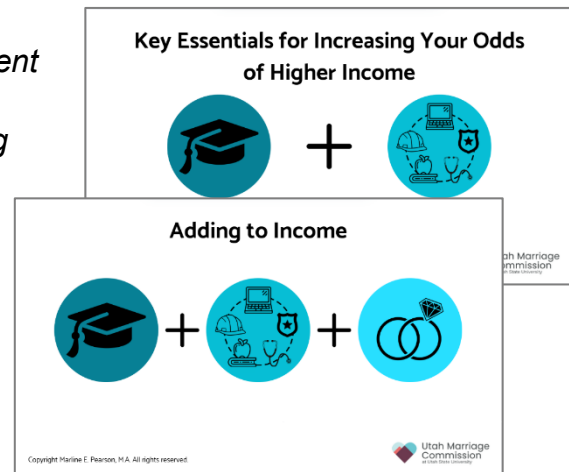
Watch [“His Story”](#) video.

- ❖ *Were your guesses right? What were the steps that were mentioned?*
- ❖ *Let's break these down one by one and talk about why they matter so much—especially when it comes to your future ability to build a healthy marriage and support yourself and a family, if that's part of your goals.*
- ❖ **(PP)** *These milestones are:*
  - *Completing high school (or even further education or training)*
  - *Beginning full-time employment*
  - *Getting married before having children*



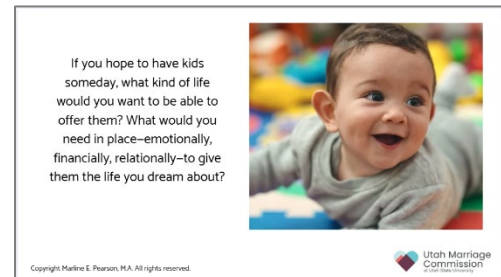
## Pathways to Success

- ❖ *As you will learn in more depth in your Financial Literacy course in high school, almost all young people who follow this Success Sequence avoid being poor and are more likely to land in the middle to upper-income groups by the time they are in their 30s, whether born rich or poor.*<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ **(PP)** *Finishing high school (or even more education or training) and full-time employment by age 25 (or enrolled in further training/education) are key actions for having better financial outcomes by your early 30s.*<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ **(PP)** *A healthy marriage can also add to income level. Marriage can mean the combining of two potential incomes, and those combined earnings can build over the years.*
- ❖ *Adults who achieve these three steps – education, employment, and marriage – almost always achieve a middle-class lifestyle and avoid being poor by their early 30s.*<sup>6</sup>



## Kids in the Mix (Think, Pair, Share)

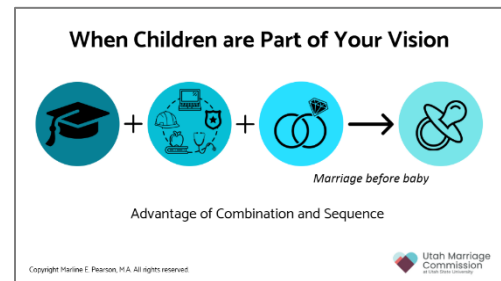
- ❖ **(PP)** *Now, let's examine when the best time is to add children to the mix. Take a minute to think about and write down your answers to these questions:*
  - *If you hope to have kids someday, what kind of life would you want to be able to offer them?*
  - *What would you need in place—emotionally, financially, and relationally—to give them the life you dream about?*
- ❖ *Think of all the things that would help a child grow up healthy and happy.*



- ❖ *If children aren't part of your vision for your future, that's okay. You can still participate. Everyone can focus on what they think a child would need and want for their healthy development.* Give students 1-2 minutes to write down their thoughts.
- ❖ *Go ahead and turn to the person next to you and share some of the things you wrote down.* Give students 1-2 minutes to share with their neighbors.
- ❖ *Would a few of you mind sharing with the class? You can share your own ideas, or if your neighbor had a really good thought, you can share that.* Pause for responses.
- ❖ *Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts. Now, let me ask you: Using what you've learned so far about sliding and deciding, making informed decisions, and the Success Sequence, what do you think are some things that would help a parent to provide these items on our list? Pause for responses.*

**Instructor Note:** Possible answers to this question could include emotional maturity, completing education or vocational training, healthy communication and conflict management skills, a full-time job, a committed relationship between parents, etc.

- ❖ **(PP)** *Now, how do you think being in a healthy marriage might help?* Pause for responses.
- ❖ *In research, the marriage milestone has been consistently linked with family stability.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, this means:*



- *The presence of 2 adults in the home;*
- *No or few changes in live-in partners (break-ups and divorces);*
- *Partners who are happy and satisfied with their relationship.<sup>8</sup>*
- ❖ *These are some powerful benefits to being married before having kids and would likely improve your chances of providing your children with the life you envision for them.*
- ❖ *Not to mention the financial benefits of having two adults who can help provide for the family's material needs.*

## Does When You Marry Matter?

**Instructor Note:** Be sure to present this information in a respectful way that simply relates the research and avoids moralizing students' choices for when to marry and start a family.

- ❖ **(PP)** *It's important to note that in some communities—including here in Utah—young adults often marry and start families earlier than national averages. That isn't a bad thing. In fact, marriage can offer emotional support and stability that help people through challenges.*

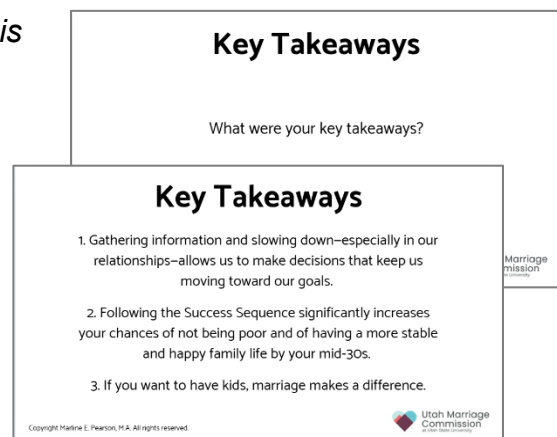


- ❖ *And although a lot of people these days think that it's best to wait until your late 20s or 30s to marry and settle down, recent research finds that couples who marry in their early-to-mid 20s have just as healthy and satisfying relationships, on average, as those who marry later. (Marrying in your teens, however, still comes with a higher risk of a divorce.)<sup>9</sup>*
- ❖ *At the same time, many teenagers and young adults are often still in the process of clarifying their values and figuring out what's important to them. Research shows that finishing education and getting established in the workforce first can give you a stronger foundation. It doesn't mean you have to delay family life forever—just that planning and preparation help ensure your family goals and financial goals can work together, not compete.*
- ❖ *So, if you do want to marry and have children early, it's even more important to think about how you'll complete your education, build career momentum, and plan for childcare and expenses. Deciding—rather than sliding—into these milestones gives you more flexibility, more financial security, and more peace of mind.*

## Key Takeaways

- ❖ **(PP)** *So, what are our key takeaways from this research? What stood out to you? Pause for responses.*

1. **(PP)** *Gathering information and slowing down—especially in our relationships—allows us to make decisions that keep us moving toward our goals.*
2. *Research shows that meeting important milestones significantly increases your chances of not being poor and of having a more stable and happy family life by your mid-30s.<sup>10</sup> These results are true regardless of your race and financial or family background.<sup>11</sup> These milestones include:*
  - a. *Completing high school (and even further education or training); and*
  - b. *Gaining full-time employment.*



3. *In addition, if children are part of your vision, being married first really helps. It usually provides a more emotionally and financially stable family situation for children.<sup>12</sup> Together, these milestones are referred to as the “Success Sequence.”*

- ❖ *Planning now—deciding instead of sliding—can help you build the foundation for your future, step by step.*
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## Section 1.4

# My Success Plans and Wrap-Up

This final part of the lesson reinforces the importance of planning and intentional decision-making which is crucial to developing agency—and ultimately to following a pathway towards success.

## Plan for Success

- ❖ **(PP)** *Now that we’ve seen what the research says and discussed some of the key life decisions that can affect your future, it’s time to turn the spotlight back on you.*

Pass out attached worksheet, [My Success Plans](#). Give students 10 minutes to complete the worksheet.



### Directions:

- ❖ *This worksheet is made up of questions to help you think through and apply the principles you’ve learned in this lesson to your own goals for the future. Think carefully about your answers and fill out as much as you can for the remainder of the class period.*
- ❖ *It’s okay if you’re not sure about some of these answers yet. Just do your best to be honest and thoughtful. If you have any questions, I’m happy to help.*

### Activity Debrief

After they are done, ask:

1. *How do you think having a plan—about school, money, or relationships and family—could help you avoid sliding?*
2. *What's one choice you want to be more intentional about—whether in school, friendships, or relationships—after what we've talked about today?*

## Homework Option

**Instructor Note:** Discussing goals and plans with a trusted adult can help students feel more accountable and can also provide opportunities for important connection and relationship-building at home.<sup>13</sup> You can assign this task for points or simply invite the students to share what they learned in class.

❖ **(PP)** *Your homework for today is to go and share your success plan with a trusted adult. Talk with them about what you learned today using these discussion prompts:*

- *“Tell me about a time in your life where you (or someone you knew) slid into a decision. What was the result? What could you/they have changed?”*
- *“Tell me about a time in your life where you gathered information to help you make a good decision. What was the result?”*

### Homework

Share your success plans with a parent or trusted adult. Talk with them about what you learned today, and discuss these prompts:

- “Tell me about a time in your life where you (or someone you knew) slid into a decision. What was the result? What could you/they have changed?”
- “Tell me about a time in your life where you gathered information to help you make a good decision. What was the result?”

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## Notes

This lesson was adapted by the Utah Marriage Commission from *Love Notes: Relationship Skills for Love, Life, and Work*. Used with permission of the author. Copyright Marline E. Pearson, M.A.

- <sup>1</sup> Decide, Don't Slide is a concept adapted for teens from the original work of Scott Stanley, Galena Kline Rhoades, and Howard Markman. This concept has become important in scholarly discussions on cohabitation and the inertia effect. See Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55(4), 499–509. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x>.  
  
Also, see Pearson, M. E., Stanley, S. M., & Rhodes, G. K. (n.d.). *Within my reach*. PREP Inc. <https://prepinc.com/collections/within-my-reach>.
- <sup>2</sup> Inanc, H., Spitzer, A., & Goesling, B. (2021). *Administration for Children & Families (OPRE Report 2021-148): 'Assessing Benefits of Success Sequence for Economic Self-Sufficiency and Family Stability'*. Washington, D.C: Targeted News Service. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/assessing-benefits-success-sequence-economic-self-sufficiency-and-family-stability>
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. See Figure 3 in report.
- <sup>8</sup> In the evaluation by OPRE (see footnote 2), family stability was measured by 1) the presence of 2 adults in the home, 2) the number of residential partner transitions, and 3) relationship satisfaction as measured by reported happiness in their relationship.
- <sup>9</sup> Hawkins, A. J., Carroll, J. S., Jones, A. M. W., & James, S. L. (2022, February 9). Capstones vs. cornerstones: Is marrying later always better? *State of Our Unions: 2022*. National Marriage Project, The Wheatley Institution, & School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/reports/>
- <sup>10</sup> Wang, W. & Wilcox, W. B. (2022). The power of the success sequence for disadvantaged young adults. *Institute of Family Studies*.  
  
And Wang, W., & Wilcox, W. B. (2017). The millennial success sequence: Marriage, kids, and the success sequence of young adults. *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY)*. Data drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to study the success sequence among the current generation of adults age 28–34.

Using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth allowed Wang and Wilcox to better capture the order of certain life events—for example, whether marriage occurred before or after childbearing along with the other key milestones of education and employment.

And it could capture those who completed the first two milestones of their success sequence model (education and employment) but did not have children and were not

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> OPRE report (see footnote 2).

<sup>13</sup> Pringle, J., Whitehead, R., Milne, D., Scott, E., & McAteer, J. (2018). The relationship between a trusted adult and adolescent outcomes: a protocol of a scoping review. *Systematic reviews*, 7(1), 207.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-018-0873-8>