

Sharing chores key to marriage

Survey: Children are less important

By David Crary
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The percentage of Americans who consider children “very important” to a successful marriage has dropped sharply since 1990, and more now cite the sharing of household chores as pivotal, according to a new survey.

The Pew Research Center survey on marriage and parenting found that children had fallen to eighth out of nine on a list of factors that people associate with successful marriages — well behind “sharing household chores,” “good housing,” “adequate income,” a “happy sexual relationship” and “faithfulness.”

In a 1990 World Values Survey, children ranked third in importance among the same items, with 65 percent saying children were very important to a good marriage. Just 41 percent said so in the new Pew survey.

Chore-sharing was cited as very important by 62 percent of respondents, up from 47 percent in 1990.

The survey also found that,

by a margin of nearly 3-to-1, Americans say the main purpose of marriage is the “mutual happiness and fulfillment” of adults rather than the “bearing and raising of children.”

The survey’s findings buttress concerns expressed by numerous scholars and family-policy experts, among them Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of Rutgers University’s National Marriage Project.

“The popular culture is increasingly oriented to fulfilling the X-rated fantasies and desires of adults,” she wrote in a recent report. “Child-rearing values — sacrifice, stability, dependability, maturity — seem stale and musty by comparison.”

Virginia Rutter, a sociology professor at Framingham (Mass.) State College and member of the board of the Council on Contemporary Families, said the shifting views may be linked in part to America’s relative lack of family-friendly workplace policies such as paid leave and subsidized child care.

“If we value families ... we need to change the circumstances they live in,” she said, citing the challenges faced by young, two-earner couples as they ponder having children.

The Pew survey was conducted by telephone from mid-February through mid-March among a random, nationwide sample of 2,020 adults. Its margin of error is 3 percentage points.

Many questions in the survey touched on America’s high rate of out-of-wedlock births and of cohabitation outside of marriage. The survey noted that 37 percent of U.S. births in 2005 were to unmarried women, up from 5 percent in 1960, and found that nearly half of all adults in their 30s and 40s had lived with a partner outside of marriage.

According to the survey, 71 percent of Americans say the growth in births to unwed mothers is a “big problem.” About the same proportion — 69 percent — said a child needs both a mother and a father to grow up happily.

The survey found some predictable patterns — Republicans and older people were more likely to give conservative answers than Democrats and younger adults. But the patterns in regard to race and ethnicity were more complex.

For example, census statistics show that blacks and Hispanic are more likely than

whites to bear children out of wedlock. Yet according to the survey, these minority groups are more inclined than whites to place a high value on the importance of children to a successful marriage.

The survey found that more than 80 percent of white adults have been married, compared with about 70 percent of Hispanics and 54 percent of blacks. Yet blacks were more likely than whites and Hispanics to say that premarital sex is always or almost always morally wrong.

Among those who have ever been married, blacks (38 percent) and whites (34 percent) were more likely than Hispanics (23 percent) to have been divorced.

The survey found that 57 percent of public opposes allowing gays and lesbians to marry. However, opinion was almost evenly divided on support for civil unions that would give same-sex couples many of the same rights as married couples.

Asked about the trend of more same-sex couples raising children, 50 percent said this is bad for society, 11 percent said it is good, and 34 percent said it made little difference.