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TUNING OUT ON MARRIAGE

How much does TV programming weigh on our attitudes and beliefs?

From "Father Knows Best" to "Home Improvement," situation comedies have served as television's most traditional vehicle for portraying marriage and family life.

In the 1990s, however, a new genre of television has reminded us *very* clearly that these subjects are not always cause for grins and giggles.

In fact, if daytime "talk" shows were the primary measuring stick of public opinion on marriage, one might think the sacrament is heading quickly toward extinction.

And, although some current top-10 comedies center on marriage and family, others focus on an array of alternatives.

Beginning with the daytime talk shows, a recent one-day sampling produced almost a complete absence of

married couples — or even men and women in stable relationships, for that matter.

Instead, channel-surfing these syndicated and network shows produced a tidal wave of variations:

"Maury Povich": Convicted rapists on parole who rape and murder.

"Montel Williams": Men who use their babies to attract women. Also, a parent determined to kill the man who raped her daughter.

"Rolonda": Parents and guardians attempting to keep their children in school. (Note: The three youths who appeared on the show were accompanied by a grandmother; a mother; and a mother and aunt. No fathers were interviewed.)

"Sally Jessy Raphael": A teenage girl with a history of drug addiction and

prostitution, whose mother wants nothing to do with her. Also, a husband who made another woman pregnant.

"Jenny Jones": Theme — "Stepfamilies in Conflict."

"Ricki Lake": Theme — "I Already Have a Boyfriend, But I'll Dump Him for You."

The only exception to this onslaught was the "Oprah Winfrey" show, on which a couple, happily married for 60 years, was interviewed.

Otherwise, marital and family issues formerly dealt with behind closed doors — perhaps even at church, through counseling or the sacrament of penance — are now shared with the nation's viewers. Not only are these private matters made public, but hosts and studio audiences react to inter-

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