

Marriage Foundation

Marriage boosts self-esteem for teenage boys and girls A robust analysis of BHPS data

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- Childhood self-esteem independently predicts life chances in adulthood, above and beyond the influence of gender, socio-economic background or other measures of childhood mental health.
- Our new analysis of data on 3,822 children from the British Household Panel Survey reveals that teenage boys living with continuously married parents have the highest self-esteem while teenage girls living with continuously cohabiting parents have the lowest. Mother's education has a smaller effect on self-esteem, while child's age and mother's income have no effect at all.
- Although these differences are all relatively small, they are highly significant, providing robust evidence that the well-being of teenagers – and therefore their future life chances – is influenced by whether or not their parents are married.

Previous research has shown that childhood self-esteem has a profound influence on future life chances, above and beyond the effect of other factors such as gender, socio-economic status, or other measures of childhood mental health (*Trzesniewski et al, 2006*).

Although severe child mental health problems are known to be more prevalent within lone parent and step families compared to two natural parent families (*Gutman et al 2015*), UK reviews that mention self-esteem have little to say about marital status (*Goodman et al, 2015*).

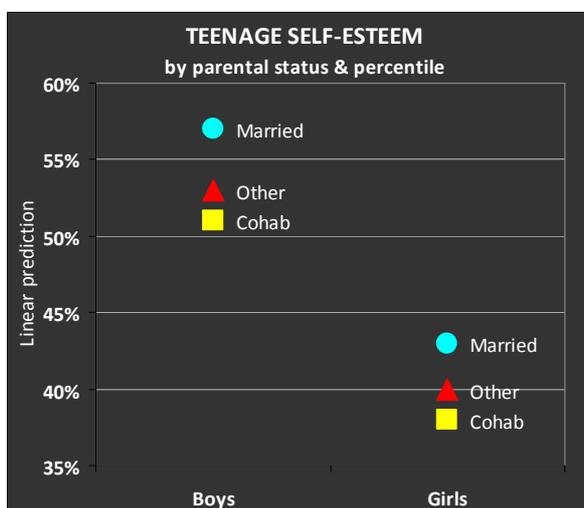
Our analysis of data on 3,822 teens aged 11-16 in the British Household Panel Survey categorises their families as continuously 'married', 'cohabiting', or 'other'. Among the intact parents, 91% were married, in line with other surveys.

Where there is doubt, we take a conservative approach, for example including married stepfamilies in the married group, which is likely to soften any benefit accruing to married natural parent families.

After taking into account child's age, year of survey, mother's education and income, we find that the average teenage boy is 13-14% higher up the distribution of self-esteem compared to the average teenage girl, while the average teenager of either sex living with both married parents is 5-6% higher up the distribution compared to those living with cohabiting or lone parents.

We conclude that teens living with married parents may be aware of qualitative strengths in their parents' relationship – such as more secure relationship dynamics or celebration of wedding anniversaries – that is less apparent if their parents are not married.

Marriage boosts teen self-esteem.



Introduction

The trend away from marriage has profound consequences for couple stability & children's life chances.

Couples who marry before their child is born are more likely to stay together while bringing up their child compared to couples who marry later or not at all. Whereas 76% of couples stay together if they were married before their child was born, 44% stay together if they married later on and 31% if they never married (Benson, 2015).

Couples who split up are then far more likely to experience poverty and need higher levels of state support.

Data from the UK Families and Children Study (FACS) shows that 47% of lone parents are in the lowest income quintile, compared to 7% of couple parents. Lone parents are then twelve times as likely to receive income support, seven times as likely to receive housing benefit, and four times as likely to live in social housing (Maplethorpe et al, 2010).

Whether through the drop in income, loss of contact with one parent, or psychological impact of parental divorce, children living in lone parent families – on average – tend to fare worse on almost any negative social indicator (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2004; Panico et al, 2010).

For example, FACS data shows that UK children living in lone parent families are twice as likely to experience either health or behaviour problems (Maplethorpe et al, 2010).

But it is children's mental health and emotional well-being that are especially powerful predictors of their later life satisfaction, mental health and family formation as adults (Goodman et al, 2015).

In the UK, recent data from the Millennium Cohort Study shows that children aged eleven living with a lone parent are 50% more likely to experience emotional problems than those living with both natural parents. This difference is more pronounced for girls – 67% more likely – than for boys – 42% more likely (Gutman et al, 2015).

On top of this, childhood and adolescent self-esteem strongly predicts a range of adult outcomes, independent of other mental health issues. These include adult mental health, criminal behaviour and economic prospects (Trzesniewski et al, 2006) as well as better self-

rated health at age 30 (Murasko, 2007) and adult weight gain at age 30 for women (Ternouth et al, 2009).

Previous analysis of younger children's socio-emotional development suggests that differences in outcomes between married and cohabiting parents may be due to prior selection factors (Crawford et al, 2013).

However a UK survey for the Early Intervention Foundation that specifically highlights self-esteem has little to say about the influence of family status, if any (Goodman et al, 2015).

This paper seeks to establish whether the apparent lack of differences in socio-emotional development between the teenage children of married and cohabiting families also applies to self-esteem.

We also explore a related measure of adolescent mental health - acceptance – which could also be thought of as a measure of life satisfaction.

Method

We used data from the British Household Panel Survey, a panel study of over 10,000 individuals from 250 areas of Great Britain between 1991 and 2009.

For our analyses, we used 8,894 person years from 3,822 children across the United Kingdom.

To assess teenage mental health, we looked at measures of “**self-esteem**” – how you feel about yourself – and “**acceptance**” – how you feel about the world around you.

The measure of “**self-esteem**” was taken from five questions coded from 1=strongly agree to 4 strongly disagree. The five questions were “*I feel I have a number good qualities*”, “*I certainly feel useless at times*”, “*I am a likeable person*”, “*I am inclined to feel I am a failure*”, and “*At times I feel I am no good at all*”.

The measure of “**acceptance**” was also taken from five questions, coded from 1=completely happy to 7=completely unhappy. The five questions were “*How do you feel about your appearance?*” “*How do you feel about your life as a whole?*” “*How do you feel about your family?*” “*How do you feel about your friends?*” and “*How do you feel about your school work?*”

Both measures were coded so that higher values indicated more self-esteem and acceptance.

To assess family structure, we took a conservative view of marriage, cohabitation and other family structures. We coded families as “**married**” only if the mother reported being “married” at each wave. This will have included mothers who had split and subsequently remarried as stepfamilies. We also coded families as “**cohabiting**” if the mother reported either “cohabiting” at each wave or a mixture of “cohabiting” and “married”. This will have included some continuously married families, making our estimates between “married” and “cohabiting” families conservative. All other families where parents were not part of a couple, or where there was any doubt, were coded as “**other**”.

We also controlled for child’s age, the year in which data was collected, sex of the child, mother’s education and mother’s income.

Results

For our analyses, our sample of 3,822 individual teenage children aged between 11 and 16 provided a total of 8,894 person-year observations.

The sample comprised 68% married families, 7% cohabiting families, and 25% other. Among parents who were still intact couples, 91% were married. This is in line with recent surveys, such as Understanding Society 2010-11 (*Benson, 2013*)

In calculating estimates of ‘self-esteem’ and ‘acceptance’ for children of continuously married, continuously cohabiting, and other families, we took various background factors into account – such as child’s age, the year in which data was collected, sex of the child, mother’s education and mother’s income.

The tables below show the predicted values and regression for ‘self esteem’.

SELF-ESTEEM PREDICTED VALUES

	Margin	95% Conf Interval	
Married	2.93	2.91	2.95
Cohab	2.86	2.81	2.91
Other	2.88	2.85	2.91

SELF-ESTEEM REGRESSION

	Coefficient	Std. Err.	t	P> t	95% Conf Int	
Parents are Married	0.07	0.03	2.34	0.02	0.01	0.12
Parents are Other	0.02	0.03	0.52	0.60	-0.04	0.07
Child’s Age	-0.02	0.00	-1.12	0.91	-0.01	0.01
Year of Data	-0.00	0.00	-1.14	0.25	-0.01	0.00
Child is Female	-0.18	0.01	-13.02	0.00	-0.21	-0.16
Mother Education	-0.02	0.01	-3.63	0.00	-0.03	-0.01
Mother Income	0.00	0.00	1.35	0.18	-0.00	0.00
Constant	6.72	3.26	2.06	0.04	0.34	13.11

The first table shows that the predicted value of ‘self esteem’ for teens living with continuously married parents is 2.93 (on the scale of 1-4) compared to 2.86 for those with continuously cohabiting parents and 2.88 for those with ‘other’ parents.

The regression table shows that the higher level of self esteem between married and cohabiting parents is significant, but there is no difference between teens in cohabiting and other parent families.

The regression table also shows self esteem is significantly lower among girls and those with better educated mothers, although this latter effect is small.

Child’s age, year of data collection, and mother’s income were not linked to self-esteem.

The next two tables repeat the process for ‘acceptance’ and show broadly similar results.

ACCEPTANCE PREDICTED VALUES

	Margin	95% Conf Interval	
Married	5.87	5.85	5.89
Cohab	5.78	5.72	5.85
Other	5.74	5.71	5.78

ACCEPTANCE REGRESSION

	Coefficient	Std. Err.	t	P> t	95% Conf Int	
Parents are Married	0.09	0.03	2.62	0.01	0.02	0.16
Parents are Other	-0.04	0.04	-1.02	0.31	-0.11	0.04
Child’s Age	-0.09	0.00	-19.36	0.00	-0.10	-0.08
Year of Data	0.01	0.00	4.98	0.00	0.01	0.02
Child is Female	-0.08	0.02	-4.43	0.00	-0.12	-0.05
Mother Education	0.01	0.01	1.04	0.30	-0.01	0.02
Mother Income	0.00	0.00	0.23	0.82	-0.00	0.00
Constant	-16.72	4.76	-3.52	0.00	-26.04	-7.40

The first table shows that the predicted value of ‘acceptance’ is higher for teens in married families at 5.87 compared to cohabiting families at 5.78 and other families at 5.74.

The regression table shows that the higher level of acceptance between teens living in married and cohabiting families is significant, but there is no difference between teens living in cohabiting and other families.

The regression table also shows that acceptance is significantly lower among younger children and girls, and very slightly higher in later years of data collection.

Mothers’ education and income were found to have no link to acceptance.

As a simpler way of understanding the scale of these differences, we recalculated the distribution of self-esteem by child’s sex and parent’s marital status.

The table below – also illustrated in chart form on the cover page – shows more clearly how teenage boys tend to have higher self-esteem than teenage girls, regardless of whether the parents are intact or married.

The average boy is 13-14% higher up the overall distribution of self-esteem compared to the average girl.

Teenagers of either sex also tend to have higher self-esteem if they live with continuously married parents.

Compared to teens living with continuously cohabiting parents, the average teen living with married parents is 5-6% higher up the distribution.

These differences take into account child's age, the year in which the survey was taken, as well as mother's education and income.

PERCENTILES FOR SELF-ESTEEM, BY GENDER

	All	Boys	Girls	Boys-Girls
Married	50%	57%	43%	14%
Cohab	45%	51%	38%	13%
Others	46%	53%	40%	13%
Married-Cohab	6%	6%	5%	

Discussion

Previous research has shown that children's self-esteem independently predicts a range of negative real-world consequences in later life, above and beyond other mental health issues (*Trzesniewski et al, 2006*).

This paper sought to identify how and whether the marital status of parents influenced levels of teenage self-esteem – how teens see themselves – and teenage acceptance – how teens perceive the world around them.

Using a sample of 3,822 teens from the British Household Panel Survey, we found that boys had higher self-esteem and acceptance than girls. This finding is in line with other UK data showing that girls are more likely to experience emotional problems (*Gutman et al, 2015*)

Our new finding is that teens of either sex living with continuously married parents also had higher self-esteem and acceptance than those living with continuously cohabiting parents or with other family types.

These findings all take into account the age of the child, the year in which data was collected, and also the mother's education and income levels.

For self-esteem, the biggest influence overall was the sex of the child, followed by whether the parents were married.

Overall, boys living with married parents had the highest level of self-esteem while girls living with cohabiting parents had the lowest.

For acceptance, age and sex of the child and whether the parents were married were all similarly influential. Boys, younger children and those with married parents had the highest acceptance.

Mother's income had no effect on either measure for teens. Mother's education only had a small effect on teen self-esteem.

When we divided the sample into high and low levels of well-being, we found that boys and teens with married parents were more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem. Family structure did not otherwise affect low levels of self-esteem or either level of acceptance.

These findings are interesting not just because they show a clear benefit to teen well-being of living with continuously married parents. The surprise is that this same benefit does not accrue to continuously cohabiting parents over other families, predominantly lone parents.

The way our study was structured makes these findings conservative as well as robust.

Within the BHPS dataset, it was not clear whether mothers who were reported as 'married' were married to the natural father, since we don't know what happened before the teen was aged 11. Some of these 'married' parents will have been stepfamilies. The prevalence of severe mental health issues among children in stepfamilies is even higher than among those in lone parent families (*Gutman et al, 2015*). Therefore had we been able to segregate only those teens living with both natural parents who were also married, we would probably have found even greater differences between teens of married parents and their otherwise comparable peers.

For continuously 'cohabiting' parents, we experienced a similar problem in that it was not clear if both were the natural parents. The presence of cohabiting step-families might be expected to depress well-being scores. However we also included in this group those who were

married at one or more – but not all – waves of the survey, which might have boosted scores.

For ‘other’ parents, we also took a conservative approach, including not only lone parents but also any others where their continuous status as either married or cohabiting was not entirely clear.

Our findings pose a new question. Why should two similarly aged teenage boys or girls from similarly educated families differ in their self-esteem merely because one set of parents is married and the other not? In other words, what is sufficiently apparent to the teen in the married family, compared to the teen in the cohabiting family, that leads them to feel better about themselves?

Previous research from Marriage Foundation shows that married parents are more likely to remain intact than cohabiting parents of similar age and education (Benson, 2015).

Even if it is often argued that currently married and cohabiting parents produce similar outcomes for children (e.g. Crawford *et al*, 2013), the underlying differences that ultimately cause more married couples to remain intact and more cohabiting couples to split up must be present in the relationship somewhere.

It has already been established that self-esteem is related to closeness and security in relationships (Murray, 2005). Thus it’s plausible that teens are responding to the relative security or insecurity experienced by their parents.

There is evidence that married and cohabiting couples differ in at least three different ways.

First, a recent study that matched married and cohabiting couples for quality and length of relationship found that holding hands reduced the stress level of a threat, but only for the married couples (Coan, 2014).

Second, a study of 236 new mothers showed that cohabiting couples were twice as likely to adopt a particularly negative pattern when arguing compared to married couples. This pattern was consistent with greater insecurity (Benson, 2009).

Third, it’s likely that the symbols and rituals present among married parents, such as photos of the wedding day and annual anniversary celebrations, have a positive effect on family bonding and security (Nock, 2009).

Although we controlled for mother’s education and income, it’s possible that married parents differ from unmarried parents in other ways that make their children feel more secure. These could include better neighbourhood, better jobs for the parents, more time with parents.

Nonetheless the conclusion of this study is that some characteristic of their parents’ marriage makes teens feel better about themselves and the world around them as a result.

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