



# Marriage Foundation

## Happy Christmas?

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- If the parents are happy, the kids are happy. If the parents are fighting, the kids are stressed.
- According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 13.9 million dependent children in the UK. Of these, 3.0 million children live with a lone parent and 10.8 million live in a household headed by a married or cohabiting couple. Five out of six of these couples are the children's natural parents.
- Using data from the survey Understanding Society, we estimate that 9.8 million children – 90% of those in two adult households – will spend Christmas in a '*happy*' home, where the adults are at least somewhat happy with their relationship and quarrelling no more than occasionally.
- Although 1.04 million children – 10% – will spend Christmas in an '*unhappy*' home, in most cases quarrels between parents will be only occasional and therefore relatively '*low conflict*'.
- It's the '*high conflict*' households that are most stressful for children. This will affect 194,000 children – 1.8% – where the adults are both unhappy and quarrelling most or all of the time.

What may be obvious to parents isn't always obvious to the children. Although there's good evidence that happy parents mean happy kids, it's less clear that children respond negatively to parental unhappiness (*Froyen et al, 2013*).

What they do see is conflict and its absence. The two family settings that are most destructive to children are 'high conflict' relationships that remain intact and 'low conflict' relationships that break-up. The former may be self-evident. The latter is not, because children don't see it coming (*Booth & Amato, 2001*).

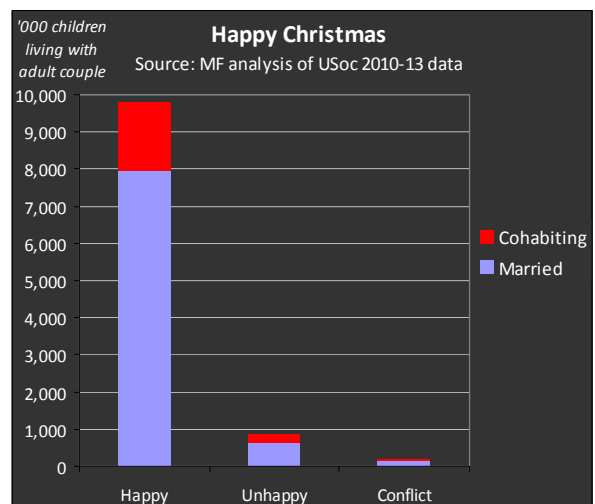
Last year, using data on 22,000 adults from Understanding Society Waves 1-4 between 2010 and 2012, we ran an analysis of how happy couples were with their relationship and how often they quarrelled (*Benson & James, 2015*).

We identified couples in one of three categories: those who reported they were at least somewhat happy, those who said they were unhappy but not quarrelling excessively, and those who were both unhappy and in a high state of conflict.

Applying these proportions to the latest population data on Families and Households

(*ONS, 2016*) gives us a good estimate of the number of children who will spend Christmas in couple households that can be described as "happy", "unhappy" or in "conflict".

Although 90% of households are essentially happy, over 1 million children will spend Christmas in a household that is unhappy. How stressful this is for the children most likely depends on whether it is accompanied by high levels of parental conflict, which is the case for some 194,000 children.



## Top tips for making sure your marriage stays intact

A full article is available at [marriagefoundation.org.uk](http://marriagefoundation.org.uk) under 'Get Help'

1. **Choose to value your marriage** – it all boils down to attitude. You need to buy in to the importance of your marriage and put your spouse first. Everything else will follow.
2. **Get properly informed** – find out what you are doing wrong and what you need to do right. Read a top relationship book, such as What Mums Want\*, The Marriage Book or Let's Stick Together.
- \***What Mums Want (And Dads Need To Know)** by Harry & Kate Benson, will be published on 20 Jan 2017.
3. **Get properly skilled** – learn the skills that make up a happy marriage and put them into practice. Go on The Marriage Course.
4. **Get properly supported** – the very best help comes from your own married friends who will have been through their own troubles. You don't have to do this on your own.

## Data and estimates

### MF analysis of Understanding Society 2010-2013 data

Couples	Married	Cohabiting
Happy	91%	88%
Unhappy	7%	10%
Conflict	2%	2%

### ONS Families and Households 2016, Families with children

	Married	Cohabiting	All couples
Population	8,732	2,111	10,843

### How many children living with couples?

	Married	Cohabiting	All couples
Happy	7,943	1,862	9,805
Unhappy	643	201	844
Conflict	147	48	194

### How many happy as % of all couples with children

	Married	Cohabiting	All couples
Happy	73%	17%	90%
Unhappy	6%	2%	8%
Conflict	1%	0%	2%

## References

- Benson, H. and James, S. (2015) Out Of The Blue: Family Breakdown in the UK. Marriage Foundation; Cambridge.
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- Froyen, L., Skibbe, L., Bowles, R., Blow, A. & Gerde, H. (2013), Marital Satisfaction, Family Emotional Expressiveness, Home Learning Environments, and Children's Emergent Literacy. Journal of Marriage and Family, 75, 42-55.
- Office for National Statistics (2016) Families and Households, 1996 to 2016