



Marriage Foundation

“Date Nights” Strengthen Marriages

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

Steve McKay, University of Lincoln

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- Marriage educators often recommend that couples go out on regular “Date Nights” as a way to keep their relationship alive and healthy.
- We analysed data on 9,969 couples in the Millennium Cohort Study to compare how often they went out together as a couple when their child was nine months old with whether they were still together as a couple when their child was aged eleven.
- Our surprise finding is that married couples – but NOT cohabiting couples – who went out monthly were significantly less likely to split up, even after taking into account mother’s age and education, marital status and reported relationship quality. Couples – married or not – who went out weekly fared as badly as those who hardly ever went out at all.
- As far as we know, this is the first ever empirical test of the effectiveness of date nights. It shows that occasional date nights reinforce and strengthen stability, but only if you’re married.

Google the words “*date nights*” or “*importance of date nights*” or “*what to do on date nights*” and any number of articles by relationship commentators pop up exhorting couples to get out and spend time on our relationship.

The reasonable assumption is that time out together as a couple is romantic, giving couples an opportunity to talk, away from the constraints of children and home, while also demonstrating commitment and intent in making their relationship a top priority.

Using data from Waves 1 and 5 of the Millennium Cohort Study, we decided to test this idea empirically, to our knowledge for the first time.

Among 9,969 couples with a child aged nine months old, 11% had date nights once a week or more, 30% had them once a month, 23% went less often, and 36% hardly ever or never.

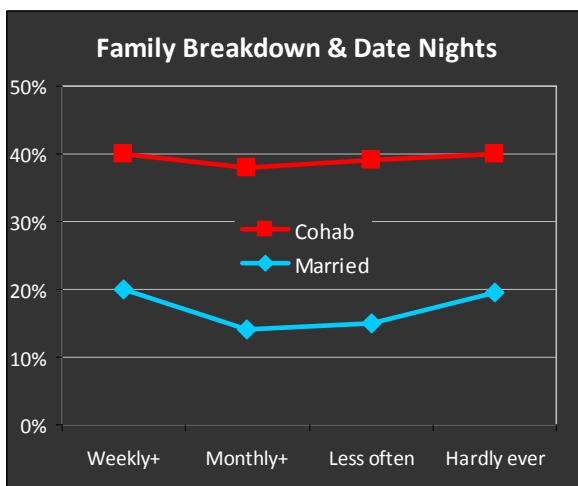
Overall, the odds of splitting up among couples who went out monthly or less often were 14% lower over the next ten years compared to couples who went out either weekly or rarely.

However these lower odds only applied to married couples and not to cohabiting couples.

Our analysis took into account age, education, marital status and relationship quality, all of which had greater impact than date nights.

Relationship quality explained part of the link between monthly date nights and higher stability, because happier couples were more likely to go out monthly than less happy couples.

But by far the most important indicator of future stability was being married. The odds of break-up among married parents was 57% lower compared to cohabiting parents, all other things being equal, even date nights.



INTRODUCTION

Everyone wants reliable love. But everyone also knows that not all relationships remain that way.

Family breakdown is at near-epidemic levels. The clearest indicator of this is that 45% of today's teenagers do not live with both natural parents (*Benson 2013*).

Relationship commentators and marriage courses often recommend that couples keep their love alive through regular "date nights".

The rationale seems sensible.

Weekdays are filled with work and childcare. Going out together in the evening is a chance to focus on one another and connect with what's important. After all, the children are supposed to leave home at some point whereas the parents have the possibility of a whole lifetime together.

But do "date nights" make a real difference? And how often do date nights need to take place to optimise this? Or are date nights just a symptom of the state of the relationship and, in reality, other factors are much more important?

These are the questions we sought to address in our analysis. Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, we were able to look at how often parents with nine month old babies went out as a couple and follow them through to see who was still together by the time the children were eleven years old.

We are aware of other papers that have discussed date nights (*Brower et al 2016, Wilcox & Dew 2012*). However, to our knowledge, this is the first time that the effectiveness of date nights has ever been assessed empirically over the long term with a large sample of couples.

Our working hypothesis was that marriage and socio-economic factors would have an effect on whether couples stayed together or not. If Date Nights had any effect at all, we predicted that the more often couples went out the better.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Our analysis draws on Millennium Cohort Study data from 15,207 mothers with nine month old babies. These babies were all born during 2000 or 2001. The mothers were surveyed again when their children were aged three, five, seven and eleven.

We looked at what happened to the mothers, as couples, between the first and last of these waves, i.e. over a period of just over ten years.

At the initial wave, mothers were asked "how often do you go out as a couple". The answers ranged from 'weekly' to 'hardly ever or never'. They were also asked a variety of questions about their background – including age, education, and whether they were married or not – as well as about the quality of the relationship.

Our regression models aimed to identify the unique importance of each of these factors on whether couples would be together or not when their child is aged eleven.

In our models, we focused on the 9,967 mothers who had been part of a married or cohabiting couple in the original survey and also responded to the later survey.

The table at the end of this report shows how the models progress, from left to right:

- **Model 1** looks purely at the frequency of *date nights* and their effect on stability
- **Model 2** adds the background factors of *Mother's Age* and *Education*
- **Model 3** adds the *Marital Status* of the couple, whether Married or Cohabiting
- **Model 4** adds *Relationship Quality*, as measured by responses to the statement: *My partner is sensitive and aware of my needs*.

In each model, the column marked 'Sig' shows the statistical significance of each factor.

The column marked 'Odds' shows the odds ratios within each factor. These are only relevant if statistically significant: for example, using Model 4, the odds ratio for mothers in their 30s splitting up is 35% lower than for mothers in their 20s, all other factors remaining equal.

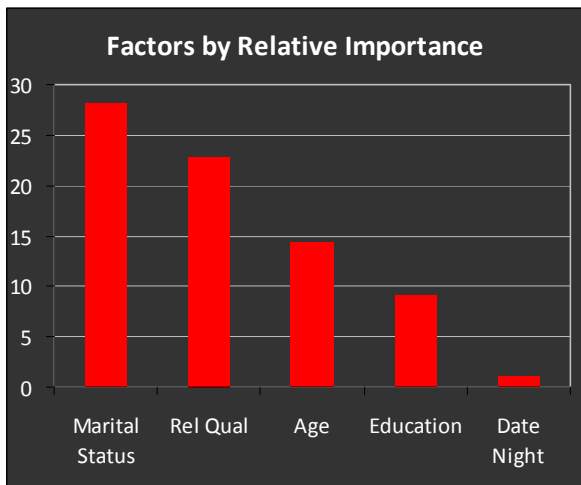
The column marked 'Wald', only in Model 4, shows the relative importance of each factor: for example, with a Wald of 149, Age is a more important factor than date night, with a Wald of just 10.

RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS

In terms of relative importance, therefore, date night frequency ranks at the bottom of the list of factors, based on the Wald scores in Model 4.

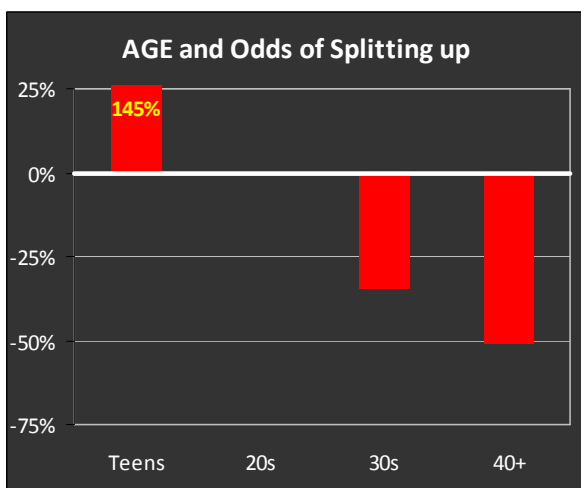
Age and education are both more important than date night. However by far the most important factors are relational: whether the couple are married or not; and the quality of relationship.

This analysis demonstrates that marriage has a unique effect on stability above and beyond the influence of relationship quality and is the most important factor determining who stays together and who splits.



AGE

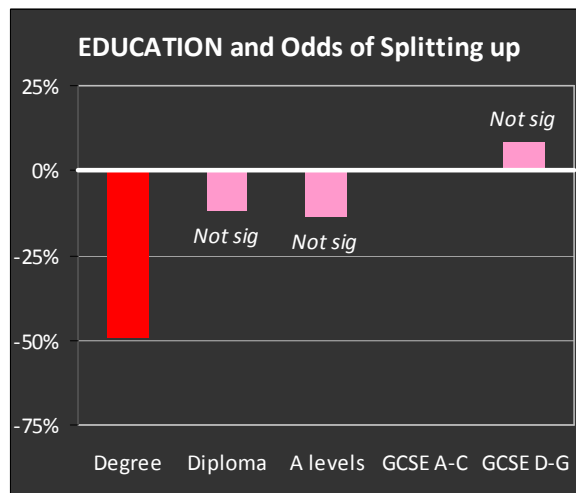
Looking at each of these factors individually – and holding other factors constant – the odds of mothers in their 30s splitting is 35% lower than for mothers in their 20s. For mothers in their 40s, the odds are 51% lower. For the minority of teenage mothers, however, the odds of splitting are more than double (compressed in this chart).



EDUCATION

In terms of education, the odds of splitting up among mothers with a degree are 49% lower compared to mothers with GCSE Grade A-C.

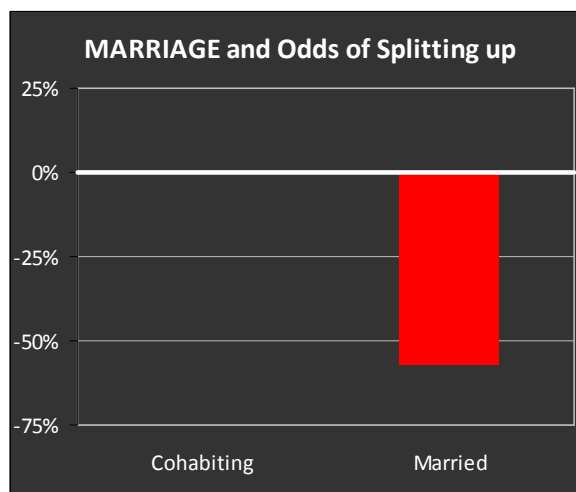
No other educational qualification – whether Diploma, A-levels of GCSE grade D-G – provides any significant advantage or disadvantage over mothers with GCSE Grade A-C.



MARITAL STATUS

As mentioned above, this analysis shows that marriage is the most powerful predictor of stability. Even after taking into account the effects of date night, age, education, and relationship quality, the odds of cohabiting mothers splitting up are more than twice the odds for married mothers. Alternatively the odds of married couples splitting are 57% lower.

This gap in outcomes between married and cohabiting couples varies little whether we control for relationship quality or not. In model 3 – excluding relationship quality – the odds of splitting are 2.45 times higher for cohabiting couples. In model 4 – including relationship quality – the odds of splitting are 2.35 times higher.

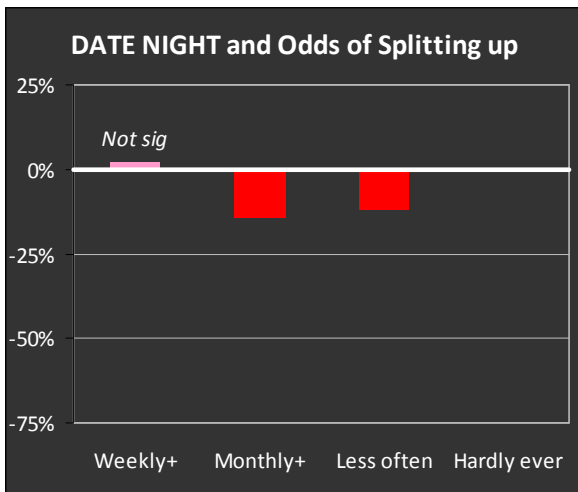


DATE NIGHTS

The main purpose of this study was to identify what effect, if any, date nights have on the odds of staying together or splitting up.

Compared to couples who ‘hardly ever’ went out, couples who went out weekly or more often were no more likely to stay together. However the odds of splitting up among couples who went out monthly or more often were 14% lower ($p=.008$). For those who went out less often, the odds were 12% lower and of more marginal statistical significance ($p=.044$).

In other words, the relationship between how often couples go out and their likelihood of staying together is not linear. Going out more often does not help couples stay together.

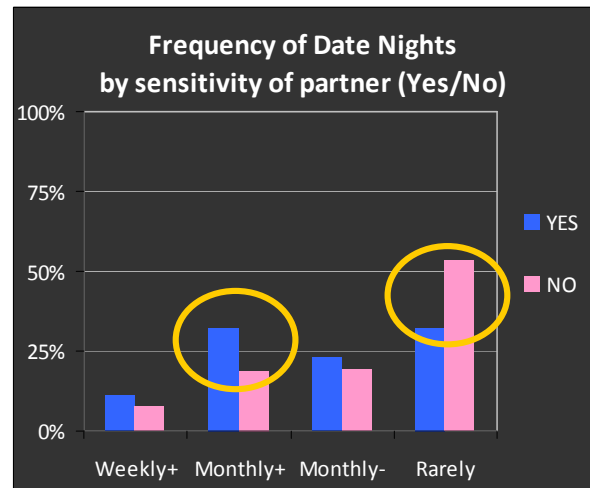


RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

In investigating why this might be the case, we noticed that couples with higher quality relationships – as measured by a number of related questions – were more likely to go out monthly rather than weekly. Couples with lower relationship quality were more likely to go out rarely if ever.

The next chart shows this effect, based on the extent to which mothers agreed with the statement ‘My partner is sensitive and aware of my needs’.

This pattern – of more happy than unhappy couples going out monthly – was repeated when mothers were asked about the extent to which their partner *doesn't listen*, they sometimes felt *lonely when with their partner*, their relationship was *full of joy and excitement*, they wished there was *more warmth and affection*, or they suspected they were *on the brink of separation*.

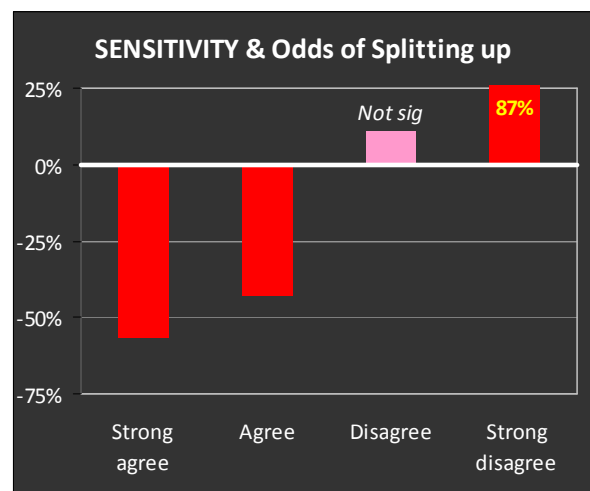


The importance of including *sensitivity and awareness* as an indicator of relationship quality can be seen in the difference in odds between Models 3 and 4 for monthly date nights.

In Model 3, monthly date nights appear to reduce the odds of splitting up by 24%. However in Model 4, the odds reduce to 14% lower, a more realistic figure.

The following chart shows how relationship quality has a similarly powerful effect on the odds of breaking up as marital status.

Among couples who strongly agreed that their partner was sensitive and aware of their needs, the odds of breaking up were 56% lower than those who neither agreed nor disagreed. For those who merely agreed with this statement, the odds were 43% lower. Among those who strongly disagreed, the odds were 87% higher.



MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

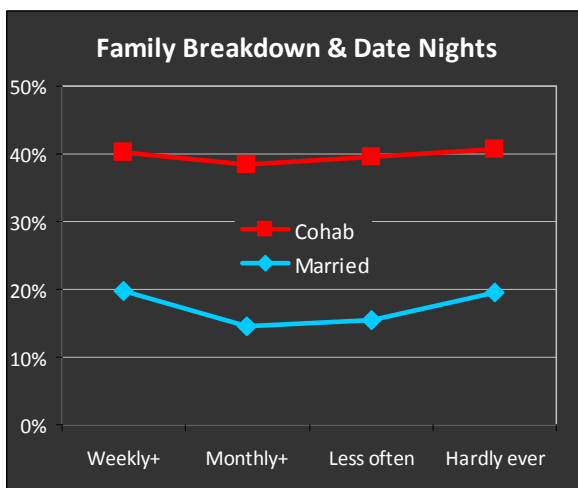
We have already shown how the proportion of couples who separated during the first eleven

years of parenthood depends greatly on whether couples were initially married or cohabiting.

But the chart below shows how there is also some variation in breakdown among couples, depending on how often they went on a date night.

Separate analysis – not shown here – revealed that the odds of splitting up among married couples who had monthly date nights was 30% lower than those who hardly ever went out. Among those who went out less often, the odds were 24% lower. Both of these differences were highly significant. Going out weekly had no effect.

Among cohabiting couples, however, there were no significant differences in the odds of splitting up. So for cohabiting couples, on average, date nights make no difference whatsoever.



DISCUSSION

Our analysis – to our knowledge – is the first to assess the effectiveness of date nights as a way to strengthen relationships.

Over the first eleven years of parenthood, we found several factors that influenced the odds of staying together or splitting up during this period.

The most powerful factor, independent of those we investigated, was whether couples were married or not. The odds of married parents splitting up were 57% lower than for cohabiting parents.

Relationship quality also plays an important part, independently of marriage. The odds of splitting up among couples who agreed that their partner

was sensitive and aware of their needs was 43% lower than those who neither agreed nor disagreed, and 56% lower if they agreed strongly.

Education also matters. However here, graduates stand alone as a group with statistically lower odds of breaking up. When it comes to stability, having a degree makes a difference.

Age also makes a difference, with a general tendency that the older the couple the greater the chance of staying together.

After taking all of these factors into account, date nights still have a small but significant effect on the odds of staying together. But this only applies to married couples and only if the date nights are monthly or less often.

As a group, all other factors being equal, cohabiting couples appear not to get any benefit whatsoever from date nights.

In our analysis, we showed that those with initially stronger relationships – across a range of measures – were more likely to go out monthly than those with weaker relationships. Had we not included a measure of this in our analysis, the apparent boost of monthly date nights would have been even greater (from a 14% difference in odds to a 24% difference).

It is possible that including more measures of relationship quality might have further reduced the apparent advantage of monthly date nights. However given the similarity of patterns among several other measures, this seems doubtful.

So why do married couples seem to benefit additionally from the occasional date night out whereas cohabiting couples don't?

Perhaps it boils down to the original assumption behind date nights.

By going out every so often, married couples reinforce the importance of their relationship. Because their relationship is founded on a clear public act of commitment, a night out together makes a statement about the nature of the relationship.

Among cohabiting couples, where there is some element of ambiguity about the future of the relationship, a night out of any kind is simply a night out.

REGRESSION MODELS - ODDS OF SPLITTING UP BY FACTOR

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Wald Sig	Odds
DATE NIGHTS								
(vs Hardly ever/never)	0.00		0.00		0.00		10 0.03	
Weekly or more	0.57	1.04	0.17	0.90	0.17	0.90		0.77 1.02
Monthly of more	0.00	0.79	0.00	0.76	0.00	0.76		0.01 0.86
Less often	0.00	0.79	0.00	0.81	0.00	0.82		0.04 0.88
AGE								
(vs 20s)			0.00		0.00		149	
Teens			0.00	3.34	0.00	2.34		0.00 2.45
30s			0.00	0.56	0.00	0.66		0.00 0.65
40 plus			0.00	0.44	0.00	0.51		0.00 0.49
EDUCATION								
(vs GCSE A-C grades)			0.00		0.00		95 0.00	
Degree			0.00	0.43	0.00	0.49		0.00 0.51
Diploma			0.00	0.80	0.10	0.87		0.14 0.88
A levels			0.00	0.77	0.03	0.84		0.07 0.87
GCSE D-G			0.13	1.12	0.28	1.09		0.32 1.08
MARITAL STATUS								
Cohabiting (vs Married)					0.00	2.45	294 0.00	2.35
RELATIONSHIP QUALITY								
(vs Neither Sensitive nor Insensitive)							239 0.00	
Strong agree							0.00	0.44
Agree							0.00	0.57
Disagree							0.28	1.11
Strong disagree							0.00	1.87
CONSTANT	0.00	0.34	0	0.55	0.00	0.37	56 0.00	0.56

REFERENCES

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- Wilcox, W. & Dew, J. (2012). The date night opportunity: What does couple time tell us about the potential value of date nights?. National Marriage Project, University of Virginia.