

Marriage Foundation

Couples on the brink

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- Parents of young children who are unhappy with their relationship represent a tiny minority of all parents, either 2%, 5% or 8%, depending on how broad the measure of unhappiness.
- Taking the unhappiest parents – those scoring 1 or 2 on a 7-point scale – only 7% of these said they were still unhappy ten years later, regardless of whether they stayed together or split up. Two thirds said they were happy or very happy, scoring 6 or 7.
- The parents most likely to split up during the subsequent ten years were those who reported they were neither happy nor unhappy when their child was born. The same was true for couples who suspected they were ‘on the brink’. The parents most likely to split up were those who were unsure if their relationship was on the brink or not.
- This analysis provides robust evidence that (a) unhappiness is relatively rare, and (b) unhappiness is rarely permanent. Couples most at risk are those who are either unsure about their happiness or unsure whether their relationship stands on the brink or not.

It is widely presumed that ‘staying together in an unhappy marriage’ condemns couples to a life of misery.

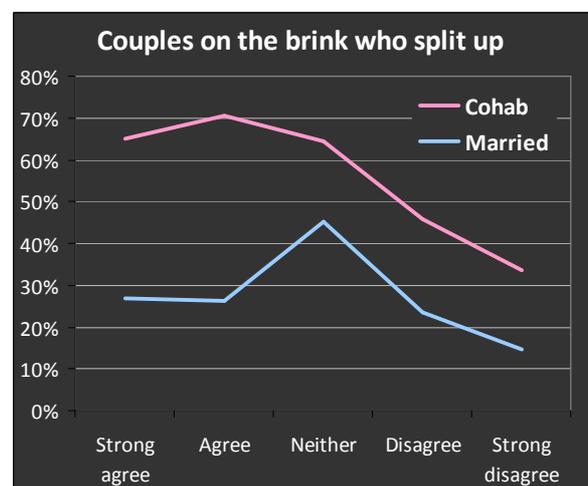
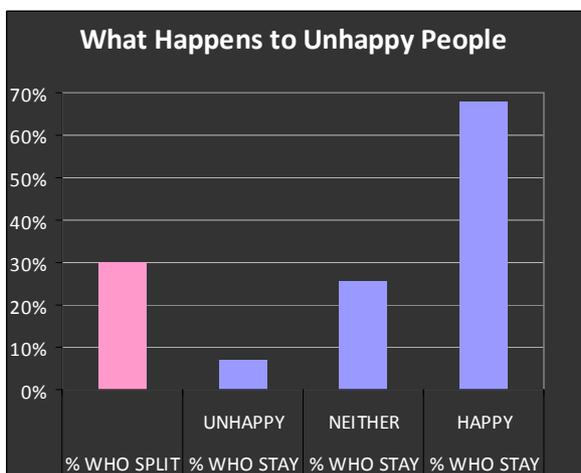
Our analysis of data from 10,000 parents with new born children in the Millennium Cohort Study finds that only 5% of new parents were initially unhappy with their relationship.

Of this small minority, 30% split up within ten years. Of those who stayed together, two thirds reported that they were now happy and only 7% still unhappy. This means that, among all parents, just 1 in 400 start off unhappy, stay together and are still unhappy ten years later

Our analysis additionally revealed that the small minority of married parents who suspect their relationship is on the brink actually end up doing fairly well, with a similar break up rate – just under 30% – to those who think they are not on the brink.

This is not the case for cohabiting parents, for whom the relationship is more linear.

The chart below shows how cohabiting parents with new born children are more likely to split up than married parents during the next ten years, regardless of how secure or insecure they initially believe their relationship to be.



INTRODUCTION

Family breakdown is arguably at the highest level in UK history. Nearly half of all UK teenagers have are not living with both parents (*Benson, 2013*).

The main reason this is important is that family breakdown leads to lone parenthood and a reduction in parental resources, especially time and money. The consequence is that children in lone parent families tend to face more difficult circumstances that can continue into adulthood (*Maplethorpe et al, 2010*).

Both marital status and relationship happiness play important roles in distinguishing parents who stay together and avoid family breakdown (*Benson & McKay, 2016*).

This study seeks to establish the prevalence of relationship unhappiness, whether unhappiness is directly predictive of subsequent instability, and whether unhappy people remain unhappy if they stay together and become happy if they split up.

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 and partners – if present – were asked “how happy are you in your relationship”. Answers were scored from 1 to 7 where 1=very unhappy and 7=very happy.

Mothers were also asked if they suspect they are on the brink of separation. The answers were scored from 1 to 5 where 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree.

Finally they were asked a variety of other questions about their relationship and about their background – including age, education, and whether they were married or not.

Our regression model 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 model, we focused on the 9,962 mothers who had been part of a married or cohabiting couple in the original survey and also responded to the later survey.

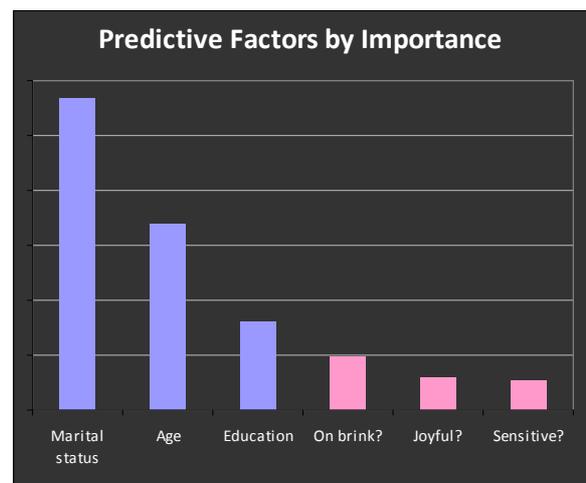
Our previous analyses have shown the unique effect of marital status, age and education when the child is born on the odds of staying together ten years later.

As well as these factors, we included eight separate relationship questions, all of which also had unique – though lesser – effects on subsequent stability.

- *Suspects on the brink of separation*
- *Relationship is full of joy and excitement*
- *Partner is sensitive and aware of needs*
- *Partner has ever used force*
- *Wishes there was more warmth and affection*
- *Partner doesn't listen*
- *Sometimes lonely when with partner*
- *Can make up quickly after an argument*

The chart below illustrates the relative importance of these factors, based on the Wald number in the regression, including only the three most important relational factors.

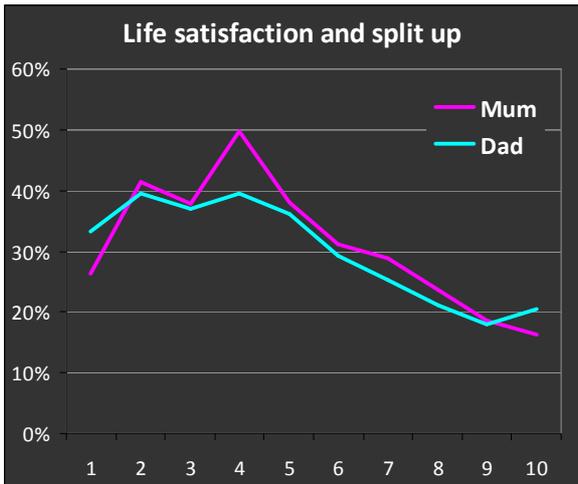
The strongest predictor is marital status, followed by age and education. The strongest relational factor is whether couples are ‘on the brink’, followed by whether there is ‘joy and excitement’ and whether the partner is ‘sensitive and aware’. Each of the remaining five factors – not shown in the chart – all has lower relative importance.



LIFE SATISFACTION

The link between life satisfaction shortly after birth and stability when the child is aged eleven is broadly speaking linear. Higher life satisfaction is associated with higher stability – or lower instability.

However the bottom 2% of parents with the lowest life satisfaction – scoring 1-3 out of ten – are more stable than the next 2%, those who score 4 out of ten and prove to be least stable. The numbers involved here are clearly small.

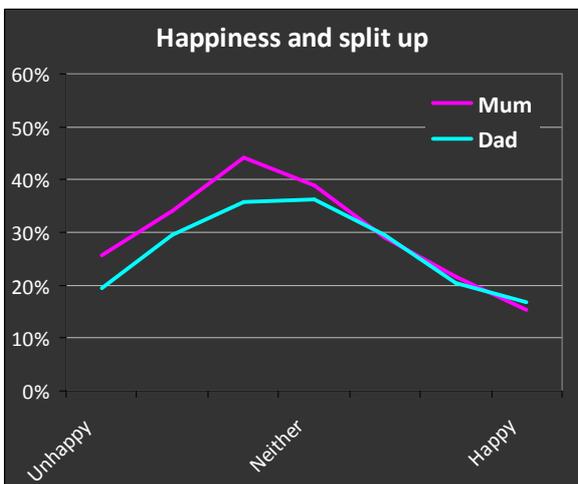


HAPPINESS

The 5% least happy parents – scoring 1 or 2 out of 7 on ‘how happy are you in your relationship’ – are as likely to stay together as the 17% of slightly happy parents – scoring 5 out of 7.

Unsurprisingly, those most likely to stay together are the happiest, the 67% majority of parents who score 6 or 7 out of seven.

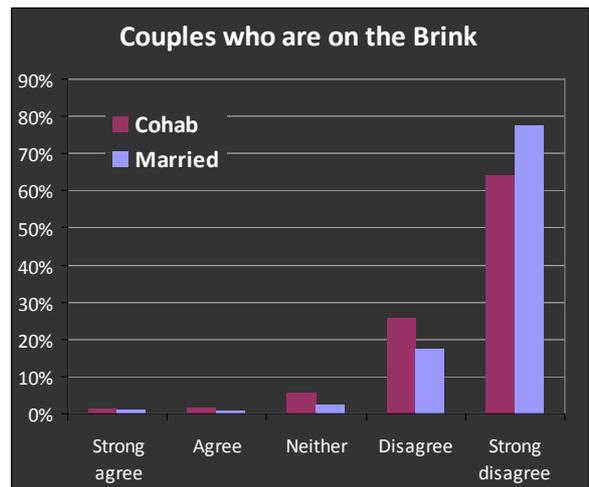
Those most at risk are the 10% of parents who are either slightly happy or neither happy nor unhappy, scoring 4 or 5 out of seven.



COUPLES ON THE BRINK

As with life satisfaction and happiness, the proportion of couples who say they are on the brink is small. Just 1% strongly agree and a further 1% agree.

At the other end of the scale, a higher proportion of married parents, compared to cohabiting parents, strongly disagree. Proportions are similar for mums and dads.

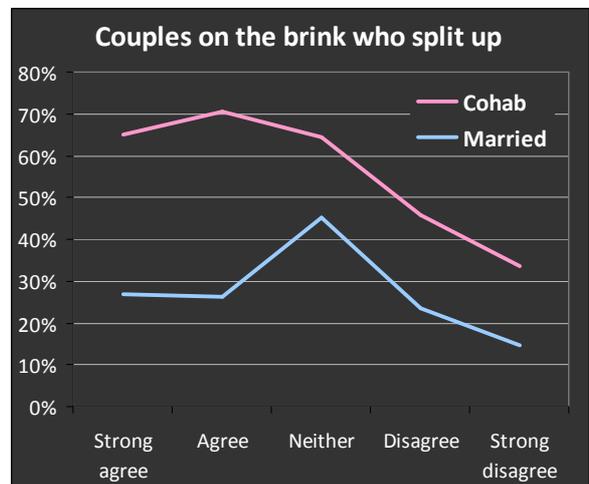


The extent to which cohabiting couples think they are on the brink is a linear predictor of stability. The more doubt, the bigger the risk. In all cases, their risk is higher than among married couples.

However the 2% married couples who suspect they are on the brink – either agree or strongly agree – are as likely to stay together as those who disagree, but not strongly.

The 2% married couples who say they are neither one thing nor the other face the highest risk.

45% of these split up compared to 27% of those who strongly agree, 26% who agree, 23% who disagree and 15% who strongly disagree.



SENSITIVITY, JOY AND EXCITEMENT

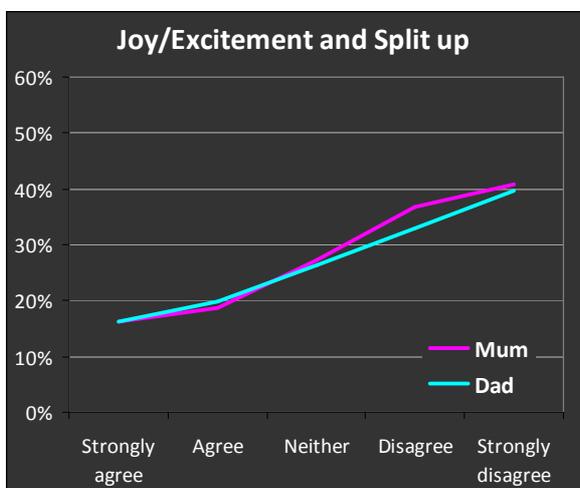
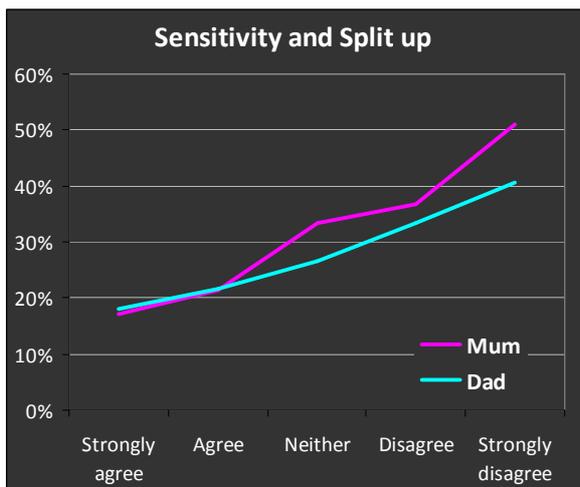
Across the other questions that have a unique, if small, impact on future stability, relatively few couples express concerns soon after their child is born.

For example, 8% of mums disagree that their partner is sensitive and aware of their needs compared to 6% of dads. So mums are slightly more likely to think their partner is not sensitive and aware.

Much the same is true for those who do not think their relationship is full of joy and excitement. 9% of mums say it is not compared to 7% of dads.

In both cases, the relationship between how couples answer the question as new parents and whether they stay together or not is linear – as the two charts below show.

The less impressed couples are with their relationship or with their partner, the greater the chances that they will split up.



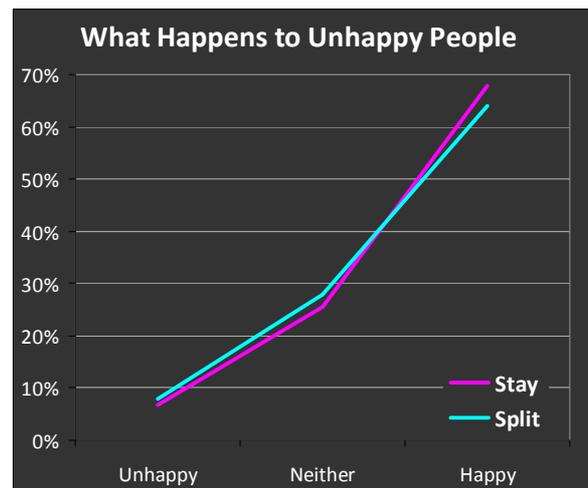
WHAT HAPPENS TO UNHAPPY PEOPLE?

We've already seen that the small minority of unhappy parents or those most on the brink, especially married parents, tend to do surprisingly well. The most at risk group are those who are neither one thing nor the other.

Parents were asked how happy they were with their relationship soon after their child was born and then again when their child was aged eleven.

Whether parents stayed together as a couple or not, the vast majority of the 7-8% of parents who were initially unhappy now said they were happy, either in their existing relationship or in a new one.

The chart below shows the extent of this overlap. In both cases, 25-28% of the unhappy parents were no longer unhappy, though not happy either. However 65-68% now said they were happy.



DISCUSSION

Our analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study looks at what happens to a large sample of parents from soon after the birth of their child, in the year 2000 or 2001, until their child is aged eleven.

New parenthood can be a time of great pressure, as well as great joy, as many parents will attest.

As well as diverting the new parents' attention away from each other and onto their new baby, there are the extra financial costs, new pressures on time, physical exhaustion, lack of sleep, inhibited libido, and the phenomenon of post-natal depression.

For those less committed, for those who 'slide' rather than 'decide' through relationship transitions, the pressure can be too much.

Most family breakdown happens in the early years of parenthood among unmarried parents (Benson, 2013)

In our study, we have shown that only a tiny minority of parents are unhappy or 'on the brink' during the early years of parenthood.

Perhaps surprisingly, the biggest risk of splitting up over the subsequent decade or so is borne by parents who are neither one thing nor the other, neither happy nor unhappy, neither on the brink or not on the brink.

The small proportion of married parents who say they are 'on the brink' do about as well as the many parents who say they are not. This is less true for cohabiting parents, for whom the relationship is more linear.

Since being 'on the brink' is such a strong statement, it is remarkable that two thirds of couples in this situation will stay together.

Our study thus also looked at whether staying together in an unhappy relationship means a life sentence of unhappiness.

Thankfully, unhappiness in a relationship only affects a small minority. Only 5-6% of parents reported that they were unhappy soon after their child was born.

Of this initial small group, 30% split up. Of those who stayed together, only 7-8% were still unhappy ten years later.

This means that, taking parents with newborns as a group, just one in 400 couples start off unhappy, stay together, and are still unhappy ten years later.

Even this tiny proportion overstates the prevalence of permanent unhappiness. It's likely that some of these unhappy couples who stayed together became happy along the way but then reverted to unhappiness.

Nonetheless, the vast majority, 64-68% of initially unhappy parents, report that they are happy years later, regardless of whether they stayed together or split up.

At the other end of the spectrum, unsurprisingly, both married and cohabiting parents who are most likely to stay together are those who were originally happiest or most clear that they were not on the brink.

Our study comprehensively undermines the idea that unhappiness soon after becoming parents is either common or permanent, or that staying in an unhappy marriage means a life of misery.

The vast majority of couples start off happy with their relationship and remain that way through the next decade of raising their children.

Of the small minority who start off unhappy with their relationship, most stay together. Of those unhappy couples who do, two thirds become happy and only a tiny minority are still unhappy ten years later.

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