



# Marriage Foundation

## Kindness

### What Mums Want (And Dads Need To Know)

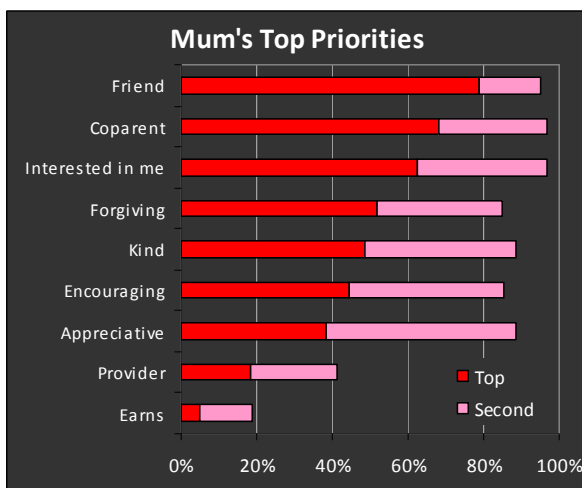
Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation  
March 2017

- A new survey of 291 mothers reveals that what mums want most from their husband or partner – happy and unhappy alike – is kindness, friendship, and somebody interested in them and their children, much more than they need a traditional provider or protector.
- Out of twenty nine roles, qualities and characteristics, *'being a friend'* was rated as most important of all at 9.5 out of ten, top choice for 79% of mums. Of sixteen qualities, *'kindness'* was rated top at 9.0 out of ten. In contrast, *'fixing things'* and *'earning a decent salary'* were rated least important at 5.9 out of ten, top choice for just 5% of mums.
- Happy and unhappy mums want dads to prioritise the same things: children, mum, himself and work in that order. The difference is that happy mums have a husband or partner who focuses a little more on mum, her work and time, and the children, and a little less on himself.

As a background study for the book **WHAT MUMS WANT (AND DADS NEED TO KNOW)** (Benson & Benson, 2017), I set up an anonymous online survey investigating mum's priorities, mum's perception of dad's priorities, and what mum would like dad's priorities to be.

Mums rated twenty nine roles, qualities and characteristics of their husband or partner in terms of importance.

This note reviews the results from 291 responses. More than anything, mums want a friend, interest in them and their children, and kindness.



#### TOP TEN ACTS OF KINDNESS for Mothering Sunday (and thereafter!) – as suggested by Harry and Kate Benson

1. *Breakfast in bed*
2. *Give mum a day off*
3. *Write a card or letter to tell mum how much dad and children appreciate her*
4. *Arrange a visit to friends, or friends to visit*
5. *Dad and children cook a meal*
6. *Dad and children tidy up*
7. *Get children to make a card or cake*
8. *Book a date night some time during the next week, or at least take mum out for a coffee or meal*
9. *Take mum out for walk*
10. *Get children to choose flowers*

## 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).

Research in the US suggests that the happiness of the mother is more important to family well-being than the happiness of the father.

- Happy wives tend to have happy husbands, but not vice versa (Carr et al, 2014).
- Happy wives influence husband values, but not vice versa (Roest et al, 2006).
- Happy mums have a stronger effect on teenager well-being than happy dads (King & Sobolewski, 2006).
- Happy mums tend to produce happy kids (Froyen, 2013)

Since half of all UK mothers are less than fully happy, and a further one in five are unhappy (Benson & James, 2015), it is reasonable to ask what factors do make mothers happy.

## METHOD

A mailshot was sent out to a list of around 800 adults inviting them – if they are mothers – to complete a five minute survey on **WHAT MUMS WANT**. A total of 291 responses were received.

The survey comprised ten sets of questions.

The first three questions covered 'How important do you think these roles/qualities/characteristics are in a husband'. Responses were on a seven point scale where 1=Not at all important and 7=Extremely important.

Using the same seven point scale, the next three questions covered 'How important do you think each of the following IS/SHOULD BE on YOUR HUSBAND's list of priorities' and 'How important

do you think each of the following is on YOUR OWN list of priorities'.

The next two questions looked at division of roles and perceived fairness. Responses to 'Overall, how do you divide up the roles in your family' were on a five point scale from 1=Mostly Him to 5=Mostly me. Responses to 'How fair do you think this division of roles is' were scaled from 1=Very unfair on him to 5=Very unfair on me.

Mums were then asked how the transitions into living together, marriage and parenthood had changed their relationship, from 1=Lot worse to 5=Lot better.

The final question asked how happy mums were in their marriage at the high point, low point and now, using a scale of 1=Very unhappy to 5=Very happy.

## RESULTS

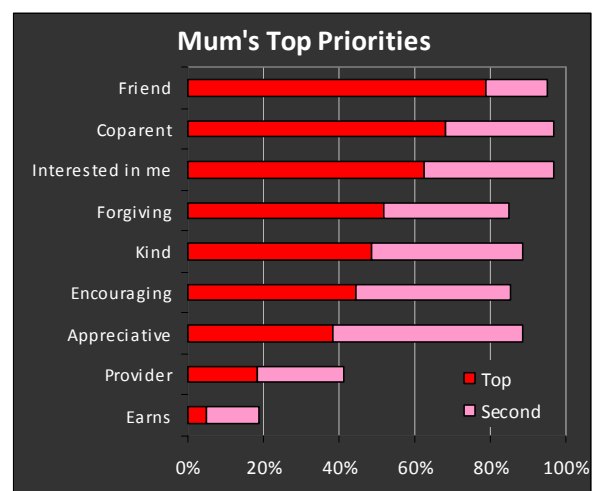
Results for each of the twenty nine roles, qualities and characteristics were rescaled from zero to ten in terms of importance.

The highest rated factors were 'friend' at 9.5 out of a possible ten, followed by 'interest in the children' and 'coparent' both at 9.4, 'interested in me' at 9.3, and 'kindness' at 9.0.

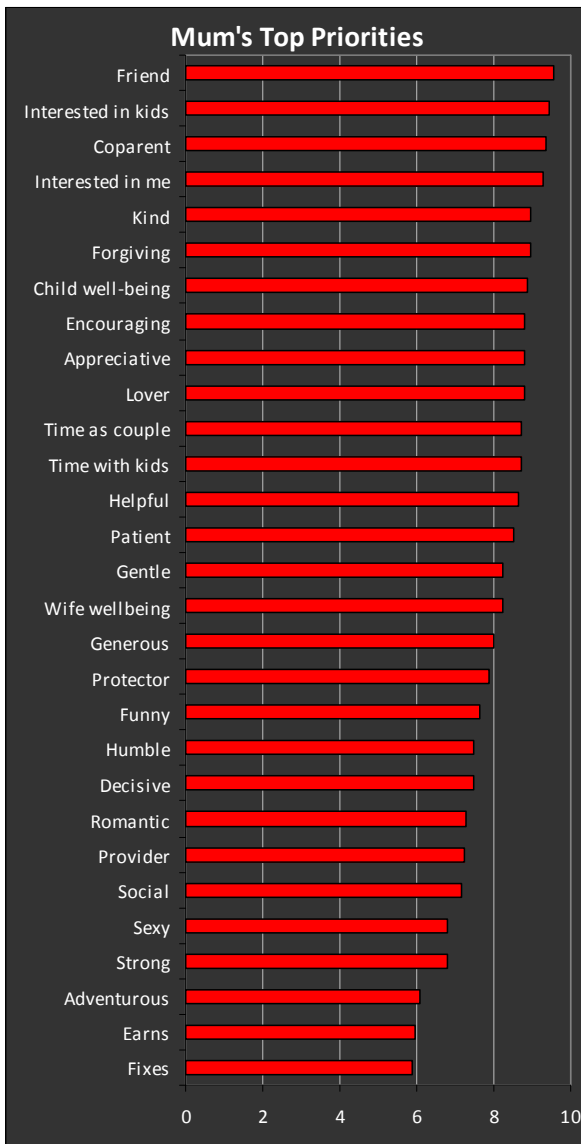
The lowest rated factors were 'earns a decent salary' and 'fixes things', both at 5.9 out of ten, followed by 'adventurous' at 6.1, 'strong' and 'sexy' both at 6.8.

The classic male stereotype, 'protector' and 'provider' were both in the bottom half of the list at 7.9 and 7.2 respectively out of ten.

This is illustrated well by the 79% of mums who rated 'friend' as their top scoring priority: only 5% rated 'earns' as their top scoring priority.



A chart of the full list of factors and their order of importance is as follows.



Happy and unhappy mums placed almost exactly the same level of importance on each factor.

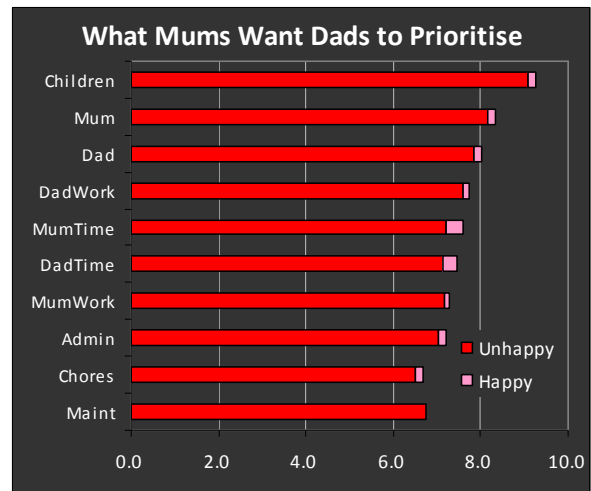
A comparison of the responses of 203 mums who rated themselves 'happy' now and 46 mums who rated themselves 'unhappy' now showed only minor differences in ratings, none of which exceeded 0.5 out of ten in either direction.

Mums were then asked how much their husband or partner actually prioritises ten aspects of family life, and how much they would like him to prioritise each aspect. Results were rescaled from zero to ten.

Once again, happy and unhappy mums did not differ significantly in terms of what they want dad to prioritise.

Top priority was a focus on the family, specifically on the 'Children', followed by 'Mum' and 'Dad'.

Bottom priority was household management, specifically 'Maintenance', 'Chores' and 'Admin'.



Not surprisingly however, there were significant differences between happy and unhappy mums in terms of what dads actually prioritise.

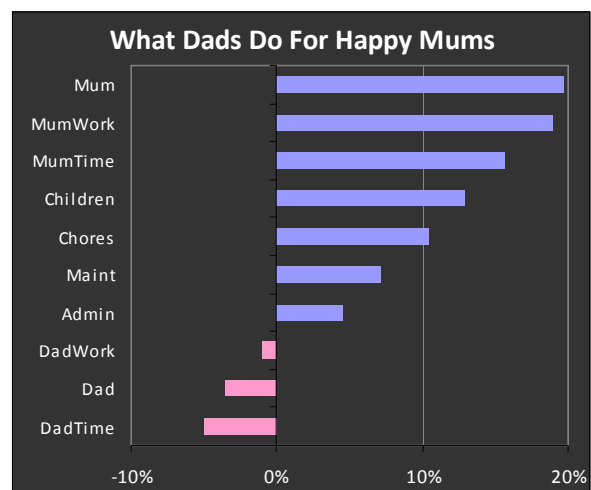
In order of priority, what mums want and what mums get is very similar for happy mums.

Among happy mums, although the order is very slightly different, the top and bottom priorities are the same. What dads actually prioritise are the 'Children' first, followed by 'Dad's Work', then 'Mum', then 'Dad'. Their lowest priorities are 'Maintenance', 'Chores', and 'Admin'.

In other words – more or less – happy mums get what they want.

In contrast, unhappy mums do not get what they want. Not surprisingly, among unhappy mums, dads focus more on 'Dad's time' and 'Dad'.

The biggest shortfalls – the difference in scores between what dads actually prioritise for happy and unhappy mums – are in prioritising 'Mum', 'Mum's work', 'Mum's time' and the 'Children'.

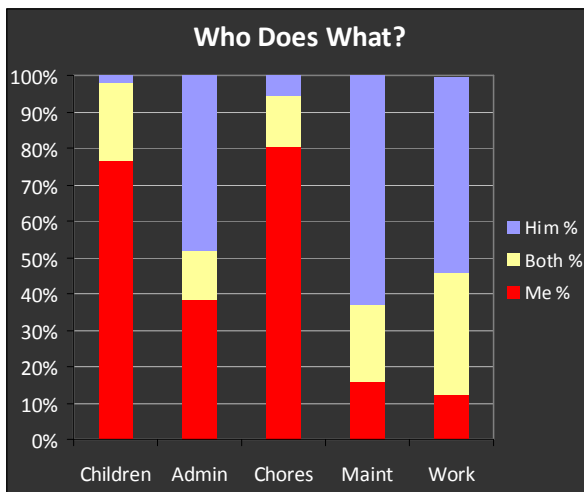


In terms of roles, this sample is fairly traditional.

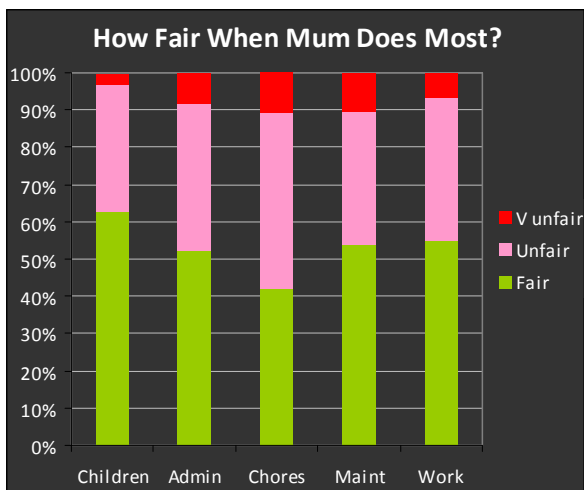
Children and chores tend to be the domain of mum whereas maintenance, work and admin are more skewed toward dad.

Whereas 76% of mums do more of the childcare and 80% do more of the chores, 63% of dads do more of the maintenance, 54% do more of the work, and 48% do more of the admin.

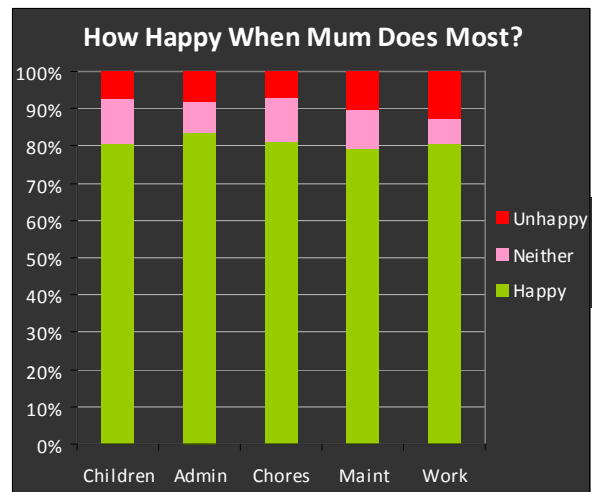
All of these roles are shared by a minority of couples. Whereas only 14% both do the admin and chores, 34% both go to work.



Even when mums do more of any of these roles, roughly half deem this a fair arrangement. Of the other half who deem it unfair, between 3% and 11% consider it 'very unfair'.



Nonetheless, mums seem to be highly tolerant of this. Even when they take on more responsibility for a particular role, in each case, 80% say they are happy with their marriage, around 10% say they are neither happy nor unhappy, and a final 10% say they are unhappy.

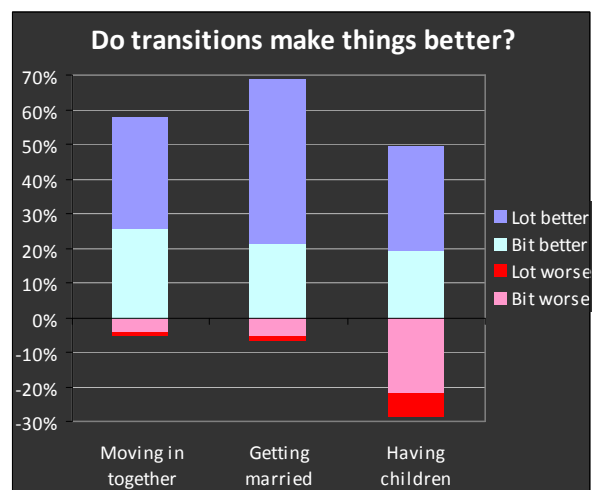


Although the numbers involved in each case are low (49, 34 and 86 respectively), between 70% and 74% of mums who say they do the majority of the childcare, admin or chores, and also think this unfair, say they are happy in their marriage. Between 9% and 15% are unhappy in each case.

Mums were also asked to rate whether transitions made the relationship better or worse.

Relationships improved for 57% of mums after moving in together and 69% of mums after getting married. In each case only 6-7% of mums said these transitions had made things worse.

Having children tended to send relationships one way or another. Although 50% of relationships improved, 29% got worse.

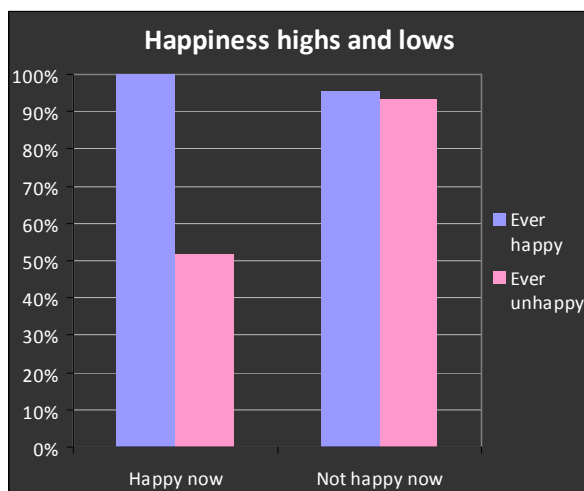


However, these averages are skewed towards the 82% of the sample who are happy now. Further analysis – not shown – reveals that 55% of parents who are not happy now said having children made their relationship worse and only 20% said children made it better. For those now happy, 23% said worse and 56% said better.

Finally, mums were asked about their high and low points of happiness.

Among those who said they were happy now, 51% had been unhappy at some point.

Among those who said they were not happy now – whether unhappy or neither – 96% had been happy at some point.



## DISCUSSION

This survey of 291 mothers produces findings which may seem a lot more obvious to mums than to dads.

- Overwhelmingly, mums want a friend, a husband or partner who is primarily family-oriented, who prioritises mum, the children and home life, and who is kind.
- Mums still value the roles of provider and protector. But earning a decent salary and fixing things come way down the list of priorities.
- Kindness, forgiveness, encouragement, and appreciation are valued well above the physical attributes of strength, sexiness, and a spirit of adventure.
- In terms of what mums want dads to prioritise, there are no significant differences between mums who are happy and unhappy with their relationship now.
- Where mums do differ is that happy mums tend to have husbands or partners who focus a bit more on mum, mum's work, mum's time, and the children, and a bit less on themselves, compared to the husbands or partners of unhappy mums.

- In this sample, most mums tend to take responsibility for the majority of the childcare and domestic chores.
- Perhaps surprisingly, more than half of these consider this a fair arrangement and less than half think it unfair. Only a small minority – less than 10% - consider it very unfair.
- Even among those who consider it unfair, the vast majority of mums are happy with their relationship.
- Looking back on their relationship transitions, most mums considered that moving in together and getting married helped their relationship. However having children was more of a mixed blessing, with half saying it made their relationship better and one quarter saying it made things worse. Among those who were not happy now, more than half said it made things worse.
- Finally, although the 'for better' phase of relationship is almost universal for all mums at some point, the 'for worse' phase is also remarkably commonplace. Half of mums who are now happy reported that they had been unhappy at some point.

These findings have implications for formal marriage and relationship education programmes and family policy, as well as informal advice about marriage and relationships.

Current programmes tend to focus on behavioural changes in communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving (*Halford, 2011*).

However there have long been dissenting voices that encourage an alternative focus on character traits (*Fowers, 2000*), intentionality (*Doherty, 2013*), empathy and awareness (*Rogge et al, 2013*).

Results lend support to the latter group, specifically that couples benefit when men focus attention on their wife or partner.

This in no way imagines that mums are doormats and all will be well if the tables are turned or at least evened up.

The key difference between a happy and unhappy mum appears to be in her husband's or partner's attitude to her, her children and their home life.

Although unhappy mums want dads to take on a more equal share of domestic chores, the whole

subject of chores sits firmly at the bottom of the list of suggested priorities for dads. Most mums are happy even when they think their majority share of the chores is unfair.

Once again, although unhappy mums want dads to prioritise mum a bit more and dad a bit less, it's still a top priority for happy and unhappy mums alike for dads to make time for themselves and their work.

These findings therefore have implications for public policy that appears exclusively focused on equality of opportunity for women.

While few would question the wisdom of this approach, what mums want most has more to do with family life than the balance of roles.

Happy families centre around happy mums. And happy mums live with dads whose first priority is kindness, friendship and the needs of mum, rather than work.

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