Establishing the facts about family breakdown transforming the debate about marriage

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In the first five years of **Marriage Foundation** we have focused on establishing the ***reality*** of family stability and instability, what actually happens to couples and their children, who stays together and who splits up. This is transforming the debate about marriage which, previously, had been obscured by myths and misconceptions.

We have now researched and publicised the basic facts by analysing data from Britain's outstanding range of national surveys conducted variously by the Office for National Statistics, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, and the National Centre for Social Research.

During this time, we have produced 36 reports, several of which in collaboration with respected social scientists, Professor Steve McKay of the University of Lincoln and Professor Spencer James of Brigham Young University, Utah.

Our findings have attracted considerable media attention and we have become the 'go to' experts and commentators on marriage and family life.

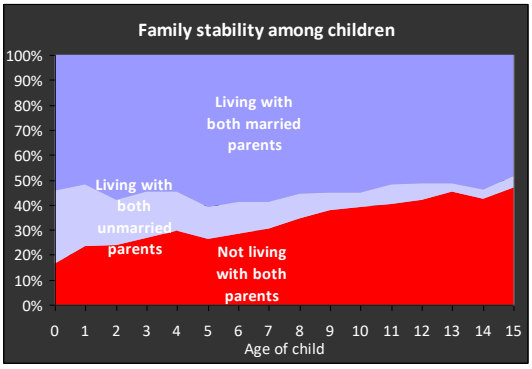
Our 700 media appearances include BBC, ITV, Sky, Channel 4 and 5 news, current affairs programmes such as Newsnight, hundreds of radio interviews including the BBC Today programme and others on Radio 2 and 4 and hundreds of articles, interviews and quotes in the national newspapers including *Sunday Times, Times, Telegraph, Mail, Guardian, Express*, and *The Sun*.

Over the next five years, we expect to focus our research on the ***consequences*** of family stability and instability and how it impacts areas such as welfare, health, mental health, education, housing, and social care.

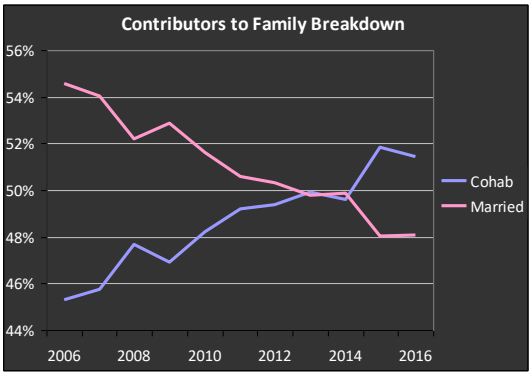
This briefing note draws together our most significant findings to date.

OUR TOP FINDINGS

- **FAMILY INSTABILITY IS AN EPIDEMIC**
  Nearly half of all teenagers today are not living with both natural parents. 45 per cent of 13-15 year olds are not living with both parents. Half of all family breakdown takes place during the first two years. Among parents whose marriage remain intact, 93 per cent are married (*Benson 2013a, data from Understanding Society*)

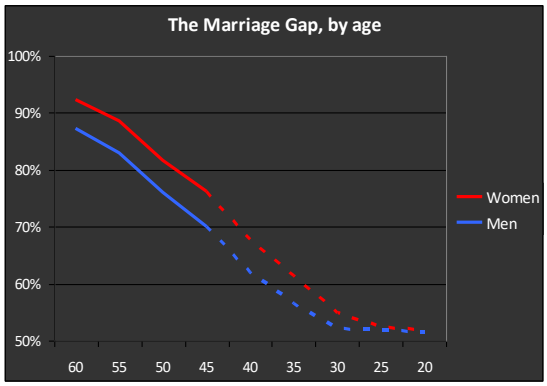


- **COHABITATION IS THE MAIN DRIVER OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN**
  The separation of unmarried parents now accounts for the majority of family breakdown. Although cohabiting parents account for 21 per cent of all couples, the separation of cohabiting parents accounts for 51 per cent of all family breakdown (*Benson 2013b, updated Benson 2017, Understanding Society*)



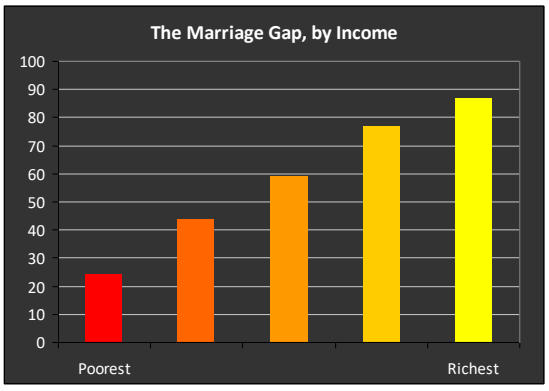
- **A 'MARRIAGE GAP' DIVIDES US BY AGE**

  Only half of today's millennials will marry. Whereas 90 per cent of today's 60 year olds have ever married, based on current trends we predict that only 52 per cent of today's 20 year old men and 53 per cent of today's 20 year old women will get married (*Benson 2014, Office for National Statistics*)



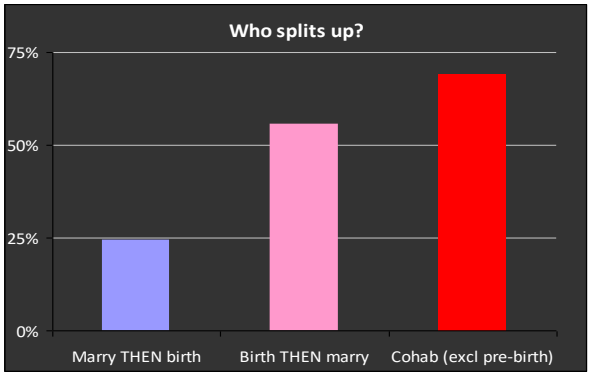
- **A 'MARRIAGE GAP' ALSO DIVIDES US BY INCOME**

  Despite the trend away from marriage, the rich overwhelmingly still get married. Among mothers with children under five, 87 per cent of those in higher income groups are married compared to just 24 per cent of those in lower income groups (*Benson & McKay 2015, Family Resources Survey*). This 'marriage gap' also applies right across Europe (*Benson & James 2015a, European Social Survey)*



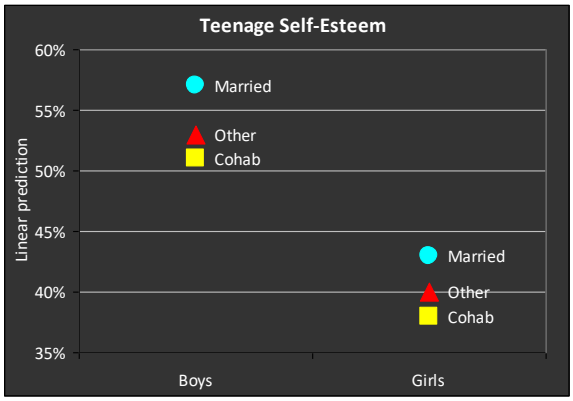
- **GET MARRIED BEFORE HAVING CHILDREN**

  Families tend to be most stable if parents are married before having children. 24 per cent of couples who married before having children split up, compared to 56 per cent of couples who married later and 69 per cent of couples who never married at all (*Benson 2015, Understanding Society*)



- **MARRIAGE IS GOOD FOR YOUR KIDS**

  Having married parents boosts self-esteem for teenagers. Teenage boys living with continuously married parents have the highest self-esteem while teenage girls living with continuously cohabiting parents have the lowest (*Benson & James 2016, British Household Panel Survey*)

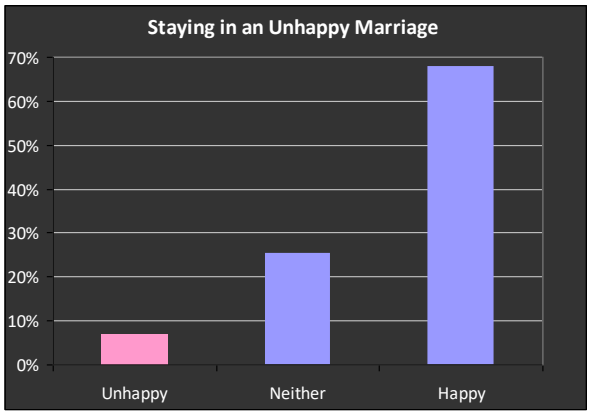


- **TOO MANY HAPPY COUPLES SPLIT UP**

  Most family breakdown appears to come completely out of the blue. 60 per cent of divorces and 80 per cent of unmarried separations involve couples who reported they were happy and not arguing especially just one year earlier (*Benson & James 2015b, Understanding Society*)

- **MEND IT DON'T END IT**

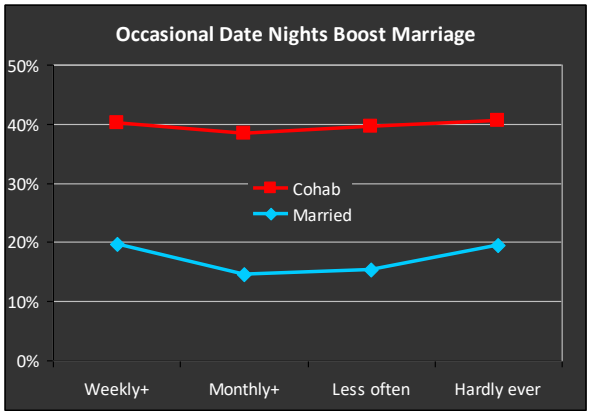
  Staying in what seems to be an unhappy marriage could be the best thing you do. Of parents who are unhappy at the time of the birth of their first child, seven in ten stay together and of these the majority (68 per cent) are happy ten years later. Just 7 per cent remain unhappy. (*Benson & McKay 2017, Millennium Cohort Study*)



- **GET A BABYSITTER**

  Occasional date nights make marriages more likely to last. Married parents with young children who went out together monthly were significantly less likely to have split up ten years later, even after taking into account mother's age and education, marital status and reported relationship quality.

  Curiously, this finding did not apply for cohabiting parents (*Benson & McKay 2016, Millennium Cohort Study*).



THE CASE FOR MARRIAGE IN BRIEF

Our original research was the **first to reveal the full extent of the problem created by the UK having the highest level of family instability in the developed world** across education groups (*DeRose et al 2017*). We showed that nearly half of all today's teenagers aged 13 to 15 are not living with both natural parents (*Benson 2013a*).

Family instability has serious and well-known consequences for children's outcomes, whether due to lack of parental resources, father absence, or instability (*Amato 2005; Brown 2004; Lee & McLanahan 2015; McLanahan et al 2013; Panico et al 2010*), especially following low conflict splits (*Booth & Amato 2001*).

The result is an enormous annual bill to the taxpayer of £48 billion (*Ashcroft 2016*). For example 60% of lone parents receive housing benefit compared to 10% of couple parents (*DWP 2015; ONS 2015*).

Our research was **the first to show that unmarried cohabitation is the main driver of instability**. The 21% of couple parents who are not married account for 51% of all family breakdown involving children (*Benson 2017*).

The explanation for this is the relative instability of unmarried cohabitation, compared to marriage, across all socio-economic groups. The hard evidence is that whereas 24% of couple parents who are married before having children split up before their child is aged 16, 69% of couple parents who remain unmarried do so (*Benson 2015*).

This huge differential in outcomes is clear evidence that most couples who marry stay together whereas only a minority of unmarried cohabitees do so. This finding holds true independent of age and education.

Our research is also **responsible for revealing the growing 'Marriage Gap' that divides the UK both by income and age** (*Benson & McKay 2015, Benson & James 2015a*).

This has been widely followed up in the media.

Nobody has to marry. Birth control has obviated the need for commitment before cohabitation. Yet the rich overwhelmingly still get married.

87% of better off parents with young children are married compared to 24% of those least well off

(Benson & McKay 2015). This *'marriage gap*' runs throughout Europe, even in Scandinavia (*Benson & James 2015a*).

Why? The rich know what our own findings strongly suggest, that marriage matters. Family stability can and will be strengthened by more people making a formal commitment especially through marriage.

We have also combated the once widely-held view against marriage is that it is the '*quality of the relationship that matters, not the status'* (*Daily Mail 2017; Relate 2017*).

We showed that this argument fails to account for decades of worsening stability during which background factors linked to relationship quality – such as age and education – should have caused stability to improve, not worsen.

The most plausible explanation for why couples who marry tend to be more stable is all about '*sliding, deciding and inertia'* (*Stanley et al 2006*).

Stability is high when couples '*decide'* rather than '*slide'* through relationship transitions, and low where the '*inertia'* of living together without a clear plan for the future tempts and traps fragile relationships to continue onward into even more fragile parenthood *(Knopp et al 2015*).

The reason why encouragement to marry will increase stability is that discussing plans for the future, and then making a decision about it, will bring greater mutual clarity and intent than might otherwise have been the case had the couple continued without making a formal commitment.

Our research has shown that substantial improvement in stability ought to be possible.

Most family breakdown is far from inevitable. Remarkably, two of three parents who split up reported just a year earlier that they were at least somewhat happy and not arguing excessively (*Benson & James 2015b; James 2015*).

Moreover even when couples are unhappy in their relationship, the vast majority of those who stick it out report they are happy ten years later (*Benson & McKay 2017*).

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