



PRESS RELEASE FROM MARRIAGE FOUNDATION

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Family breakdown top cause of poor child mental health, new report finds

Family breakdown is the biggest factor behind the UK's child mental health crisis, a new Marriage Foundation report has found.

More than a third of (36 per cent) children whose parents had split up reported poor mental health, compared to only a fifth (22 per cent) with parents who were still together.

The Marriage Foundation report, the first UK analysis to compare children's mental health to their parents' marital status, happiness and stability, has found the mere fact of having married parents acts as a buffer against poor mental health.

The report, which analysed Millennium Cohort Study data on 10,929 mothers with 14 year old children, found that children whose parents were married had reduced odds of suffering mental health problems, regardless of whether the parents split or not.

In a comparison of children from both two parent and one parent households, 32 per cent of children of unmarried parents exhibited problems compared to only 23 per cent of married parents. Among parents who had no formal relationship – neither married nor cohabiting – 40 per cent of children had problems.

Harry Benson, research director of Marriage Foundation, the think tank dedicated to promoting stable families, commented: "Mental health problems during childhood cast a long shadow over future life chances, affecting work, relationships and well-being on into adulthood.

"Current advice to government is that conflict between parents is the main family influence on children's mental health. Our analysis blows this narrow view out of the water. Whether parents are married, stay together, are happy and remain close to their children all make a unique difference.

"Despite the heroic efforts of lone parents, children need and benefit most from two parents who commit to one another and plan for the future. Family breakdown has the biggest negative impact of all. Parents who are the most uncertain about the quality of their relationship – who were neither very happy nor very unhappy – are the most likely to be unstable and subsequently break up.

"Much of what passes for early intervention is really about managing the fallout from family breakdown. Genuine early intervention means encouraging couples to make a clear commitment to their future before having children, to give their children the best possible chance of a happy and healthy upbringing."

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder and chairman of Marriage Foundation commented: “Children’s mental ill health is quite rightly near the top of the list of national social concerns. Children often carry its effects around with them well into adulthood and it can blight their lives.

“Many causes are cited (excessive use of social media, the sexualisation of children and school pressures) but while these exacerbate the problem, we seem to insist on turning a blind eye to the greatest underlying reason; family instability and breakdown. Unless and until we, as a mature society grasp this nettle we will not address the main cause and will never get on top of the epidemic.

“However many child psychotherapists we train there will simply never be enough to meet the scale of the problem. You cannot stem the flood of child mental health problems unless we sort out the main cause; family breakdown. And whether it is popular or not the simple fact is that marriages are three times more likely to endure than less formal cohabitation.

“In 44 years I spent working in the family courts, the sheer scale of the misery caused by family breakdown to the fragile emotional state of children was plain for all involved to see. In virtually every case I dealt with as a lawyer and a judge, the one thing the children wanted above all else was to see their parents and family reunited.

“Of course not all relationships can last, but many more could be made more secure through the formal commitment of marriage or saved. Invariably, it’s the children who suffer most when they fail.”

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Notes to editors

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About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge, who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year.

Marriage Foundation has highlighted the crisis of family breakdown. Their research has found that a child born today only has a 50 per cent chance of living with both parents by the time they reach fifteen.

Foundation research has also found that 93 percent of parents who stay together until their child’s fifteenth birthday are married.

A source of statistics on marriage, cohabitation, commitment, divorce and family breakdown can be found on the Marriage Foundation website: <http://marriagefoundation.org.uk/>