



# Marriage Foundation

## Family planning

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- Our new analysis of Millennium Cohort Study data shows that couples who planned their pregnancies were more likely to stay together through their children's teenage years.
- Planned births were more common among new parents who were married, in their 30s, had a degree, middle or higher income, white or Indian, Christian, and either most or least happy.
- Among married parents, 73 per cent of births were planned compared to 47 per cent among cohabiting parents and just 16 per cent among other parents – those in less established relationships or none at all.
- Whereas 24 per cent of married couples who did not plan their baby's birth had split up by the time their children were aged 14, only 18 per cent of planners had split. Among unmarried couples, 47 per cent of non-planners split compared to 38 per cent of planners. Among other parents, 76 per cent of non-planners split compared to 61 per cent of planners.
- Even after controlling for mother's age, education, ethnicity, marital status and relationship happiness 9 months after their child was born, the odds of a couple splitting up before their child becomes a teenager were 28 per cent greater if they had not planned the birth.

Successful people and businesses plan ahead. Why should successful couples be any different?

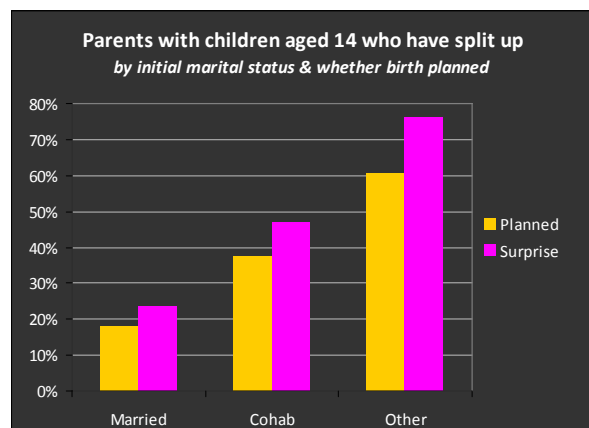
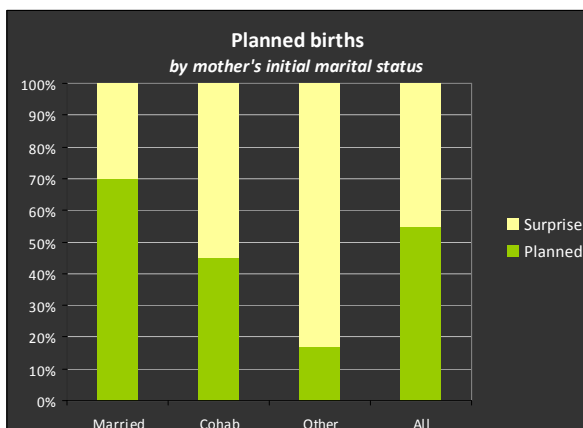
A core reason why married parents are more likely to stay together is precisely because they have planned ahead. Married couples are more likely to "decide, not slide" into their future as a couple together (*Stanley et al 2006*).

Previous research has shown that unplanned pregnancies are more common outside marriage and are associated with higher levels of parental conflict and unhappiness (*Gipson et al 2008*).

Our new analysis showed that marriage is one of the top three factors – alongside relationship happiness and age – that influence the odds of staying together as a couple.

However planned births are a significant second tier factor influencing stability, similar to the effects of religion, ethnicity, or a degree.

Our data strongly suggest that planning ahead, whether for a life together as a couple or as parents, has a major long-term impact on stability.



## INTRODUCTION

Planning ahead helps individuals, families, businesses and governments to set an agenda and work out the steps necessary to manage, achieve and succeed.

Successful individuals and families use wall charts, planners and diaries to plan daily life and holidays in the year ahead.

Successful businesses use mission statements and business plans to clarify short and long term goals, objectives and actions.

Successful governments use surveys, position papers and debates in order to decide what policy to implement and why.

Even God plans. “For I know the plans I have for you” (*Jeremiah 29:11*) and “Allah is the best of planners” (*Quoran 8:30*).

It’s hard to think why planning ahead might not apply equally well for successful relationships.

US research has already shown that couples who plan ahead for their relationship – by deciding, not sliding, through relationship transitions – are more likely to have happy marriages subsequently (*Owen et al 2013*).

Couples who plan their pregnancies tend to have lower levels of conflict and unhappiness once they become parents (*Gipson et al 2008*)

This paper compares the characteristics of UK parents who planned their pregnancy with those who did not, in order to establish the link between planning ahead and subsequent stability

## METHOD AND RESULTS

Our analysis draws on Millennium Cohort Study data from 18,374 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 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14.

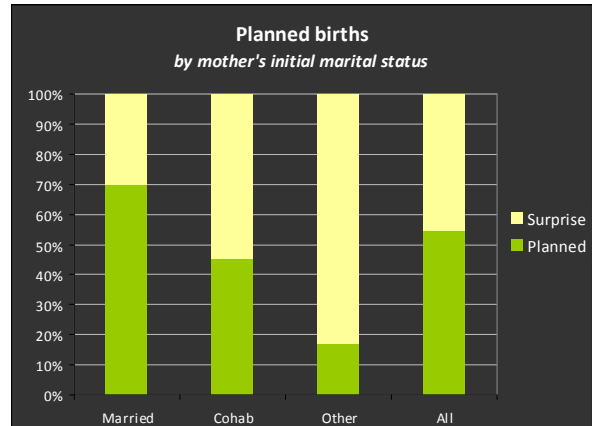
We began by looking at the initial characteristics of mothers at Wave 1, by marital status, age, education, ethnicity, religion, relationship happiness and whether their pregnancy was planned or a surprise.

We then looked at whether mothers were still living with the biological father when their child was aged 3 (Wave 2) and again at age 14 (Wave 6), with a particular emphasis on whether the birth had been planned.

## MARITAL STATUS

Our first finding was that married couples were more likely than cohabiting couples to have planned their pregnancy. Parents in other relationships, or no relationship at all, were least likely to have planned.

Whereas 73 per cent of married parents were planners, only 47 per cent of cohabiting parents and 16 per cent of other parents planned their pregnancy.



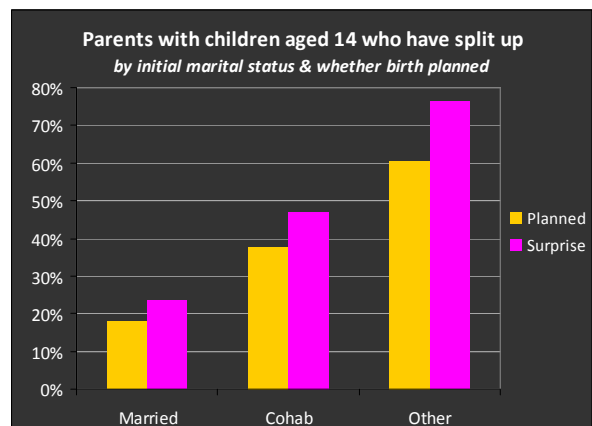
Married parents were more likely than cohabiting or other parents to stay together over 3 and 14 years.

But within each group, those who planned were also more likely to stay together compared to those for whom the pregnancy was a surprise.

The contrast in stability over 3 years is especially striking. Whereas only 4 per cent of married planners had split within 3 years, 22 per cent of cohabiting non-planners had split.

Over 14 years, only 18 per cent of married planners had split compared to 47 per cent of unmarried non-planners.

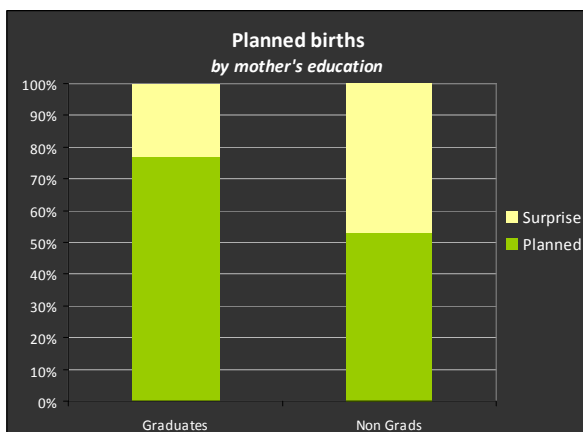
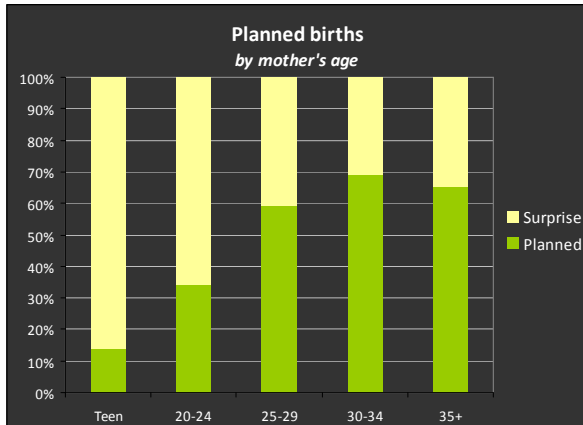
A full table of comparisons is available at [Table 1](#).



## AGE, EDUCATION, ETHNICITY, RELIGION

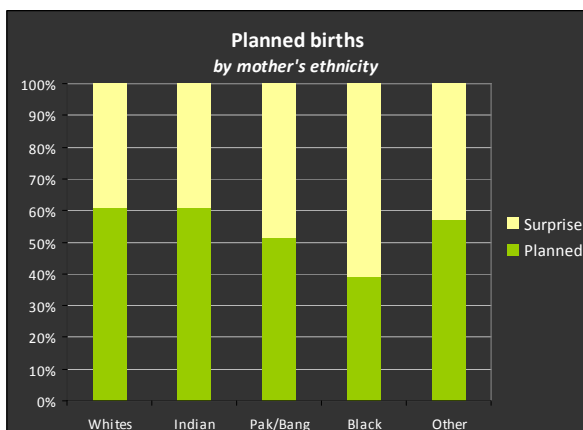
In terms of characteristics, those who were older or had a degree were more likely to be planners.

For example, 69 per cent of mothers in their early thirties had planned compared to 34 per cent of mothers in their early twenties. And 77 per cent of mothers with a degree had planned compared to 53 per cent of those without a degree.

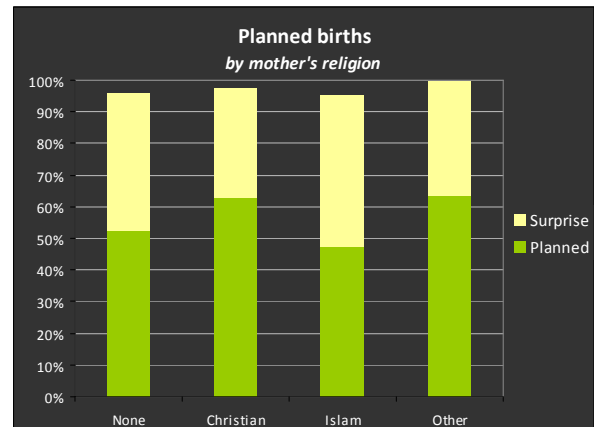


In terms of ethnicity and religion, there were also marked differences.

Whereas 61 per cent of white or Indian mothers had planned, 51 per cent of Pakistani or Bangladeshi mothers and 39 per cent of black mothers had planned.



Whereas 67 per cent of traditional Christian mothers had planned, 52 per cent of non-religious mothers and 47 per cent of Muslim mothers had planned.

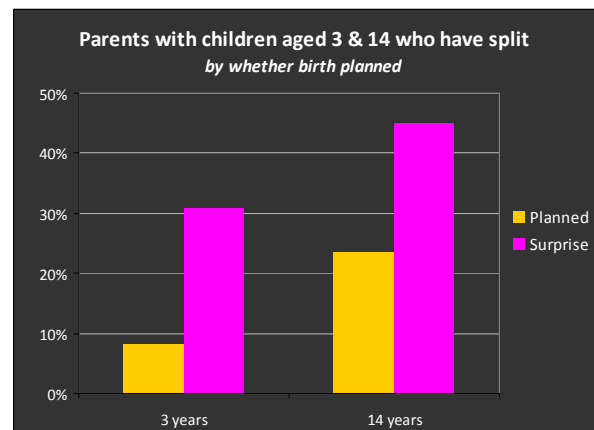


In all cases, across every group surveyed, those who planned were markedly more likely to have remained together as a couple at both 3 years and 14 years.

After 3 years, 8.1 per cent of all planners had split up compared to 30.9 per cent of non-planners.

After 14 years, 23.6 per cent of all planners had split up compared to 45.1 per cent of non-planners.

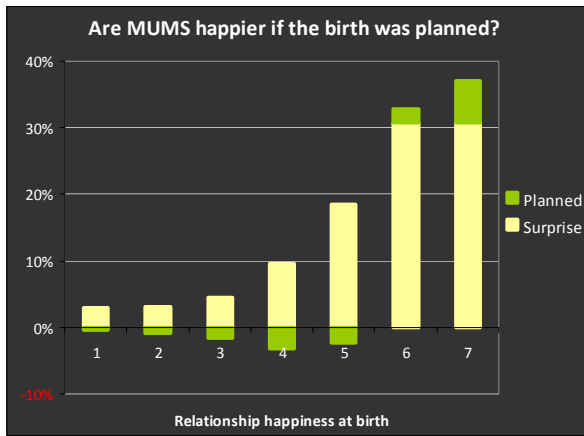
A full table of comparisons is available at [Table 1](#).



## RELATIONSHIP HAPPINESS

The vast majority of parents report high levels of relationship happiness at Wave 1, nine months after their child is born.

However, a slightly higher proportion of planners – both mums and dads – score their happiness at the highest level of 6 or 7 out of 7 whereas a slightly lower proportion score their happiness at 1 to 5 out of 7.



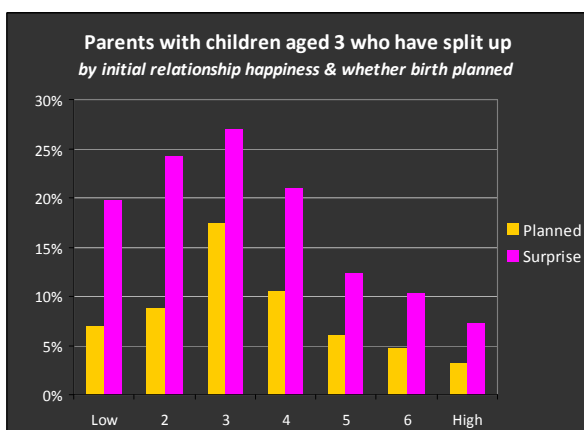
Put another way, mums who planned were around 10-20 per cent more likely to report high levels of relationship happiness and around 30-35 per cent less likely to report low to medium levels of happiness. Proportions were similar for dads.

However, in terms of stability, a very different pattern emerged.

Mothers who rated their relationship as neither especially happy nor unhappy – scoring 2-5 out of 7 – had the lowest levels of stability.

Among parents with 3 year olds who had planned their pregnancy, 17.4 per cent of mums who had rated their happiness as 3 out of 7 soon after their child’s birth had split up, compared to 7.0 per cent of mums who had scored 1 out of 7 and 3.1 per cent of mums who had scored 7 out of 7.

Those who did not plan did even worse, especially those rating their happiness between 1 and 4 out of 7.



Among parents with 14 years olds, those most likely to split had also rated themselves in the middle range of relationship happiness.

Mums who had rated their happiness at 3 out of 7 were most at risk, with 43.6 per cent of planners and 51.3 of non-planners splitting up.

In contrast fewer of the originally happiest and unhappiest mums had split up.

At the unhappiest end of the scale – those who had scored 1 out of 7 – 26.0 per cent of planners and 31.5 per cent of non-planners had split.

At the happiest end of the scale – those who had scored 7 out of 7 – 15.4 per cent of planners and 23.9 per cent of non-planners had split.

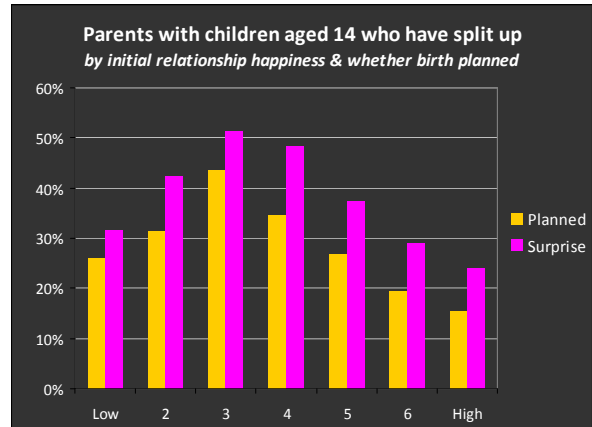


TABLE 1

	Proportion of planned pregnancy	Parents who split before child is aged 3		Parents who split before child is aged 14	
		Pregnancy planned	Pregnancy a surprise	Pregnancy planned	Pregnancy a surprise
<b>Marital Status</b>					
Married	73%	4.0%	7.3%	18.1%	23.6%
Cohab	47%	13.2%	22.5%	37.6%	46.8%
Others	16%	64.1%	74.3%	60.6%	76.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>30.9%</b>	<b>23.6%</b>	<b>45.1%</b>
<b>Age</b>					
Teens	14%	32.2%	62.9%	66.7%	74.4%
20-24	34%	22.3%	46.5%	40.0%	58.1%
25-29	60%	9.8%	26.4%	26.9%	44.3%
30-34	69%	5.5%	20.7%	20.4%	34.1%
35+	65%	4.9%	16.4%	17.7%	32.5%
<b>Education</b>					
No degree	53%	9.9%	33.5%	27.2%	47.7%
Degree	77%	3.0%	10.4%	13.8%	24.8%
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
White	61%	8.3%	31.4%	24.5%	48.2%
Mixed	55%	17.4%	60.7%	37.2%	71.1%
Indian	61%	1.7%	10.6%	11.3%	22.3%
Pak/Bang	51%	5.4%	11.1%	14.1%	16.6%
Black	39%	13.9%	56.1%	37.1%	58.5%
Other	57%	4.4%	20.0%	10.7%	23.0%
<b>Religion</b>					
None	52%	11.3%	37.4%	29.5%	56.0%
Non denom	58%	7.3%	29.5%	25.5%	49.1%
RC	57%	6.9%	29.9%	20.3%	44.0%
C of E	67%	5.3%	22.7%	22.2%	39.6%
Muslim	47%	5.4%	19.0%	15.8%	20.9%
Others	63%	6.2%	24.0%	18.0%	36.3%
<b>Relationship Happiness</b>					
Low	64%	7.0%	19.8%	26.0%	31.5%
2	59%	8.8%	24.2%	31.3%	42.4%
3	55%	17.4%	27.0%	43.6%	51.3%
4	59%	10.4%	20.9%	34.6%	48.4%
5	64%	6.0%	12.4%	26.7%	37.3%
6	68%	4.7%	10.3%	19.4%	29.0%
High	71%	3.1%	7.3%	15.4%	23.9%

Taking all of these factors into account with a regression analysis, the odds of splitting up during the first three years of parenthood were 37 per cent higher for those who had not planned.

Over fourteen years of parenthood, the odds were 28 per cent higher.

**TABLE 2**

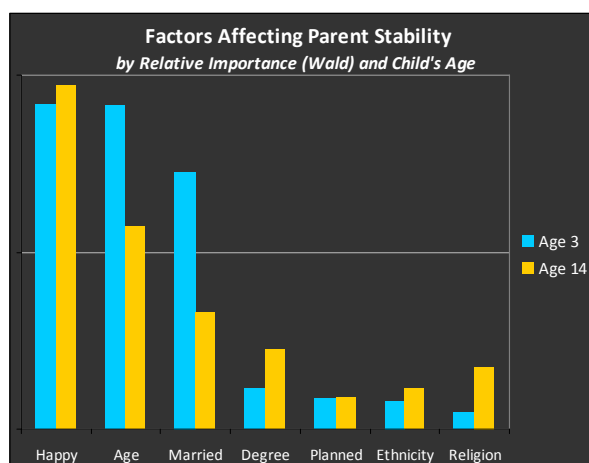
**Regression analysis**

**Odds ratios of break up compared to parents who plan pregnancy**

	Age 3	Age 14
Unplanned pregnancy	2.54	1.76
+ marital status, age, degree	1.46	1.29
+ ethnicity, religion, relationship happiness	1.37	1.28

In terms of relative importance of each unique factor on subsequent stability, the most important factors were the mother’s initial relationship happiness, age and marital status, over three and fourteen years of parenthood.

Planned pregnancy remained a significant factor over both time periods, similar to mother’s religion, ethnicity and whether she had a degree.



**DISCUSSION**

Planning ahead is a central characteristic of successful individuals, families, businesses, governments and even God.

One possible description of marriage is making a deliberate plan to spend a life together as a couple.

In this analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study, as in our previous analyses (*Benson & McKay 2016a, 2017b; Benson & McKay 2017a, 2017b*), we isolated marriage as a key predictor of stability among parents.

Our analysis showed that being married soon after the time a child is born is one of the three most important factors in determining future stability – the others being mother’s age and relationship happiness.

Over the first three years of parenthood, 18 per cent of couples who were cohabiting but not married when their child was born had split up compared to fewer than 5 per cent of those who were married. Among other non-cohabiting parents, 72 per cent had split up.

Over the first fourteen years of parenthood, 42 per cent of couples who were cohabiting but not married when their child was born had split up compared to 20 per cent of those who were married. Among other non-cohabiting parents, 73 per cent had split up.

After taking into account mother’s age, education, religion, ethnicity, relationship happiness and whether the pregnancy was planned, the odds of cohabiting couples splitting up was 73 per cent higher over three years and 61 per cent higher over fourteen years compared to equivalent married parents.

But our analysis also showed that planning a pregnancy had a significant additional impact on future stability as parents.

Regardless of what maternal characteristics we looked at, those who planned their pregnancy were more likely to stay together than those for whom pregnancy came as a surprise.

Over three years, only 8 per cent of planners split up compared to 31 per cent of non-planners.

Over fourteen years, 24 per cent of planners split up compared to 45 per cent of non-planners.

Even after taking into account mother’s marital status, age, education, religion, ethnicity and relationship happiness when her child was born, the odds of splitting up was 37 per cent higher over three years and 28 per cent higher over fourteen years if the pregnancy was not planned.

In terms of relative importance, we found that planning a pregnancy has a similar effect on the odds of staying together as a couple as mother’s education, religion or ethnicity.

Finally, previous research has identified that those who did not plan their pregnancy were also more likely to be unhappy in their relationship.

Our findings confirmed this phenomenon although the difference was perhaps less marked than we might have expected.

In previous analyses of Millennium Cohort Study data, we have shown that – over 11 years – the parents who were initially neither happy nor unhappy were subsequently least stable (*Benson & McKay 2017a*) and – over 14 years – their teenage children were subsequently most vulnerable to mental health problems (*Benson & McKay 2017b*).

In this study we showed that this curvilinear effect of initial relationship happiness continues to have a significant impact on parental stability after 14 years.

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