



Marriage Foundation

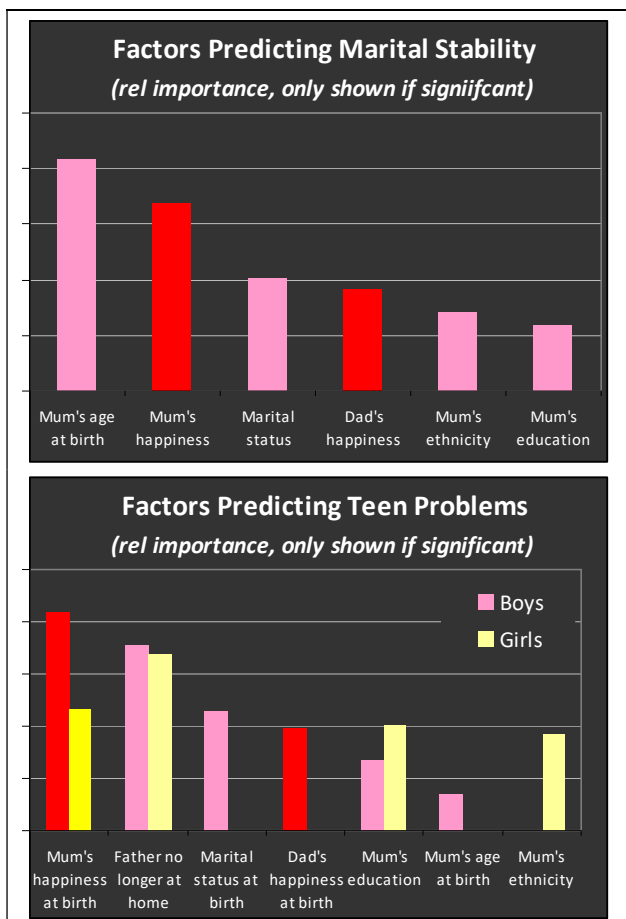
Happy Wife, Happy Life

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- Our new analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study confirms that a happy mother is a much better predictor of future family outcomes than a happy father.
- We looked at data on up to 13,000 families, following them from when the children – born mostly during 2000/01 – were nine months old to when they were aged 14 years old.
- As a new parent with a nine month old baby, mother's happiness with the couple relationship predicts her own subsequent happiness and parental stability, her teenage son or daughter's subsequent mental health problems, and her subsequent closeness to her teenage daughter, better than does father's happiness with the relationship.
- The happiness of either parent predicts subsequent closeness to sons, and also to each other's happiness, to a similar extent. However father's happiness does not predict his teenage daughter's mental health problems or mother's subsequent closeness with her daughter.



'Happy Wife, Happy Life' is a popular expression.

But is it true? Is a happy mum more important to family outcomes than a happy dad?

Previous research has pointed in this direction. Yet, so far as we know, nobody has tested this hypothesis across a range of family outcomes.

We looked at links between how happy each parent was with their relationship when their child was nine months old and four family outcomes when their child was 14 years old.

The charts highlight two of our findings.

Mum's initial relationship happiness (top chart) predicts marital stability over 14 years better than her marital status, ethnicity and education, and twice as well as dad's happiness. Only her age is a stronger predictor of stability.

Mum's initial relationship happiness (lower chart) predicts the risk that her teenage son displays high levels of mental health problems similarly to whether the father is still at home, and twice as well as dad's happiness. Mum's happiness also predicts her daughter's risk similarly to her education and ethnicity. Dad's happiness does not predict his daughter's mental health at all.

INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

In their book '**What Mums Want and Dads Need to Know**' (Benson & Benson, 2017), relationship educators Harry and Kate Benson conclude that a key to happy family life is for dad to love mum, and "*she will love him right back*".

Their hypothesis is that when couples become parents, the experience of pregnancy shifts a woman's focus away from her partner and onto her child. To make the transition work, the man must take responsibility for the relationship.

If mum is happy, then the family will function well. In other words, '**Happy Wife, Happy Life**'.

In support of this hypothesis, they cite a number of research findings:

A happy wife appears to have more effect on her husband's well being than he does on hers.

- A study of older couples found that husbands reported they were happier with both marriage and life when their wives were also happy with their marriage. Happy husbands didn't seem to have the same effect on their wives (Carr et al, 2014)

A happy wife appears to influence what her husbands thinks, whereas he does not have the same influence on her.

- A five year study of couples found that the only transmission of values within couples was from wives to husbands, and only where couples were happy in their marriage (Roest et al, 2006).

A happy mum also appears to influence her children's behaviour and well-being more than does a happy dad.

- A study of teenagers living with their mother, but not with their father, found that both parents had an influence on their behaviour and well-being. However whereas the father's influence was modest, the mother's influence tended to be stronger (King & Sobolewski, 2006)
- Another study that looked only at mums and their children found that mums who were happy in their marriage also had children who tended to be more positive in their emotional expressiveness and less negative (Froyen et al, 2013)

Happy wife appears to mean happy life, though this may be true for husbands as well.

- Married men and women who stayed happier over time were also happier with life in general and showed fewer signs of depression (Kamp Dush et al, 2008)
- How happy couples are with their marriage during the first six years of marriage tended to point to how happy they were with their life at the end of six years (Stanley et al, 2012).

However, to our knowledge, no study has yet tested the '**Happy Wife, Happy Life**' hypothesis on multiple indicators over time.

The Millennium Cohort Study dataset provides such an opportunity, following parents and their children born in the years 2000 and 2001 through six waves of data, beginning from when the child was aged nine months old through to age fourteen (University of London, 2019).

Using this large dataset, we can directly compare the initial happiness of mothers and fathers at wave one (child aged nine months) with the subsequent happiness of each parent, stability of the couple, closeness of parents to their children, and mental health of the children at wave six (child aged fourteen).

Our own previous research has already shown that mother's happiness at wave one is a strong predictor of the subsequent stability of the parents and mental health of the children at wave six, after taking into account marital status, couple stability, and mother's age, education and ethnicity (Benson & McKay, 2017a, 2017b).

However in neither of these studies did we include father's happiness with the relationship as a factor.

The only study where we did include the happiness of the father at wave one was our earlier analysis of the effect of planned birth on subsequent couple stability at wave five (children aged eleven) (Benson & McKay, 2018).

Although we did not publish the results at the time, a retrospective univariate comparison of data shows that mother's happiness has a bigger effect on stability than father's happiness.

RESULTS

We conducted four separate analyses contrasting mother's and father's happiness with subsequent family outcomes.

1. Subsequent relationship happiness

Our first analysis contrasts mother and father happiness with their relationship at wave one with the same measure at wave six.

Table 1 shows Pearson correlations between mum's and dad's happiness with their relationship, using a 7-point scale, at wave one and wave six.

Although all correlations are highly significant at $p < .001$, the correlations are perhaps smaller than might have been presumed, accounting for less than 3 per cent of variance explained even in the strongest case.

Mum's and dad's contemporary happiness correlate significantly with each other to a similar degree, where $r = .14$ at nine months and $r = .15$ at 14 years.

As predictors of each other's future happiness, correlations reduce to $r = .05$ for mum's happiness at nine months as a predictor of dad at 14 years and $r = .04$ for dad's happiness as a predictor of mum.

As predictors of their own future happiness, mum is slightly better at $r = .16$ than dad at $r = .10$.

Table 1
Correlations: happiness at 9 mths and 14 yrs

	Dad W1	Mum W6	Dad W6
Mum W1	.14	.16	.05
Dad W1		.04	.10
Mum W6			.15

Collapsing the 7-point happiness scale into three sub-categories – where 1-2 is 'unhappy', 3-5 is 'neutral', and 6-7 is 'happy' – we can look at what happens to parents who start out as either unhappy, neutral or happy.

In each case, a straight comparison of how much happy mums and dads predict their own subsequent happiness shows few differences between the yellow columns (for mums) and green columns (for dads) – **Charts 1, 2, 3**

However the charts also reveal how 75 per cent of parents who start off 'happy' (6-7, **Chart 3**) and

65 per cent of parents who start off 'unhappy' (1-2, **Chart 1**) are subsequently 'happy' (6-7).

In contrast, only 52 per cent of mums and 55 per cent of dads who start off as 'neutral' (3-5, **Chart 2**) are subsequently 'happy' (6-7).

Chart 1

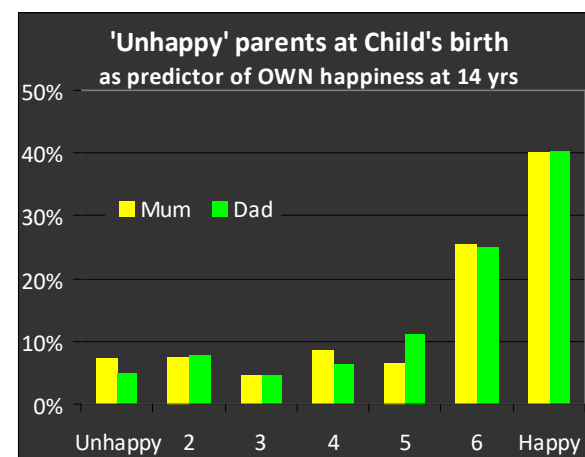


Chart 2

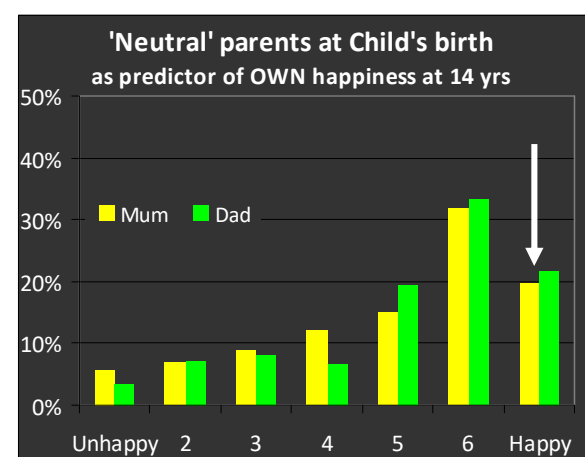
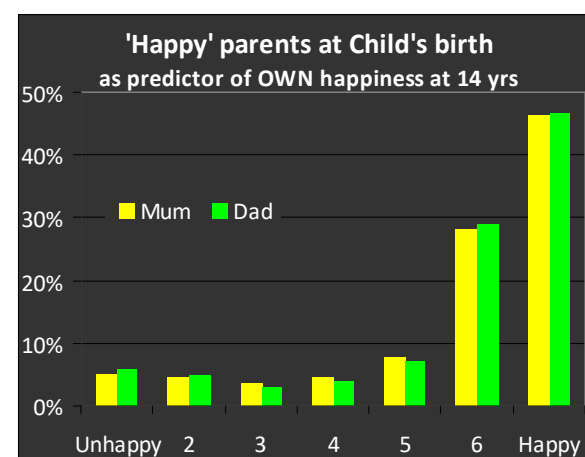


Chart 3



2. Subsequent relationship stability

Our second analysis looks at mother and father happiness and subsequent couple stability, ie whether the couple have remained together over fourteen years.

Univariate analysis reveals that mothers who report they are less happy with their relationship early on are more likely to split up than fathers who report similar levels of happiness.

Table 2 below shows the proportion of married and cohabiting couples who have broken up by the time their child is aged 14, depending on how happy the mother or father was when the child was nine months old.

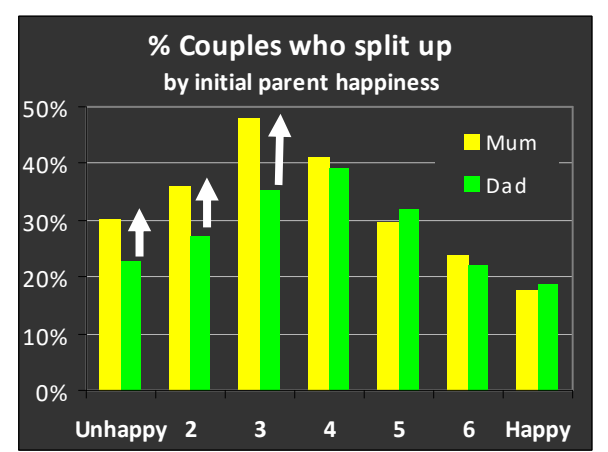
Table 2
Parent happiness and break up rates

At child's birth	Married		Cohab	
	Mum	Dad	Mum	Dad
Unhappy	22%	24%	47%	19%
2	24%	20%	68%	54%
3	42%	31%	56%	48%
4	34%	29%	54%	56%
5	24%	23%	43%	46%
6	19%	18%	35%	32%
Happy	14%	15%	29%	30%
Overall	20%	20%	39%	42%
n=	6949	7203	2435	2636

Chart 4 below looks at the overall break up rates, combining all married and cohabiting couples, and highlights how initially less happy mums (yellow) have higher subsequent instability than similarly happy dads (green).

As in our other studies, initial parent happiness shows a curvilinear relationship with subsequent parent stability, with those who report medium to low happiness early on most likely to split up.

Chart 4



Multivariate analysis takes into account mother's age, ethnicity, education and marital status at wave one.

Table 3 below shows that the happiness of both mother and father with their relationship have a unique and highly significant impact on the subsequent stability of their relationship.

However mum's happiness is nearly twice as important as a factor, based on a Wald indicator of 169 compared to 91.

Table 3
Factors at W1 that predict staying together at W6

At child's birth	Wald	Sig.
Mum's age	209	***
Mum's happiness	169	***
Marital status	100	***
Dad's happiness	91	***
Mum's ethnicity	71	***
Mum's education	60	***

In comparison with those who reported their happiness as 6 on the 7-point scale, **Table 4** below shows the odds ratios of remaining together as a couple, taking all these other factors into account.

Although dad's happiness significantly affects subsequent couple stability, couples are even less likely to stay together if mum's happiness is low, 1-3 out of 7, and more likely to stay together if mum's happiness is especially happy, 7 out of 7.

So compared to mums who rate their happiness as 6 out of 7, the odds of staying together are 29, 41 or 59 per cent lower, all other factors being equal, if mum's initial happiness is rated 1, 2 or 3 respectively.

Likewise the odds of staying together are 27 per cent greater if mum rated her happiness as 6 out of 7. These differences are all highly significant.

Table 4
Happiness and the odds of staying together

At child's birth	Mum	Sig	Dad	Sig
Unhappy	-29% **		-8% ns	
2	-41% ***		-27% **	
3	-59% ***		-32% **	
4	-53% ***		-48% ***	
5	-23% ***		-29% ***	
6	Comparison Group			
Happy	27% ***		6% ns	

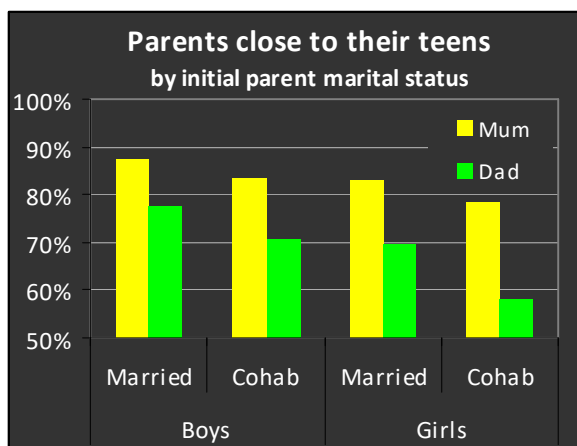
3. Subsequent closeness to child

Our third analysis looks at mother and father happiness and subsequent closeness of each parent to their children as teenagers.

Parents report closeness as either 'not very', 'fairly', 'very' or 'extremely' close.

Chart 5 below illustrates how mothers are more likely than fathers to report that they are 'very' or 'extremely' close to their teenage children, how married parents are more likely than cohabiting parents to report they are close to their children, and how teenage boys are more likely than teenage girls to be close to either parent.

Chart 5



Put the other way round, among all parents who were initially married or cohabiting couples, **Table 5** shows that 14 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls are either 'not very' or 'fairly' close to their mother, whereas 24 per cent of boys and 34 per cent of girls are less close to their father.

Table 5

Parents NOT VERY or FAIRLY close to their teens

At child's birth	Close to mum		Close to dad	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Married	13%	17%	22%	31%
Cohab	17%	21%	29%	42%
All	14%	18%	24%	34%

As with couple stability, closeness between teenagers and parents also varies with initial parent happiness in a curvilinear fashion.

Chart 6 shows how teenage girls are least close to their mother when either of their parents reported initial relationship happiness in the middle of the scale.

When dad's initial relationship happiness was 3-4 (green columns) or mum's initial relationship happiness was 2-3 (yellow columns), girls are subsequently less close to their mum.

Where the yellow columns are higher than the green columns, there is evidence that less happy mums have more impact on subsequent closeness than less happy dads.

Chart 6

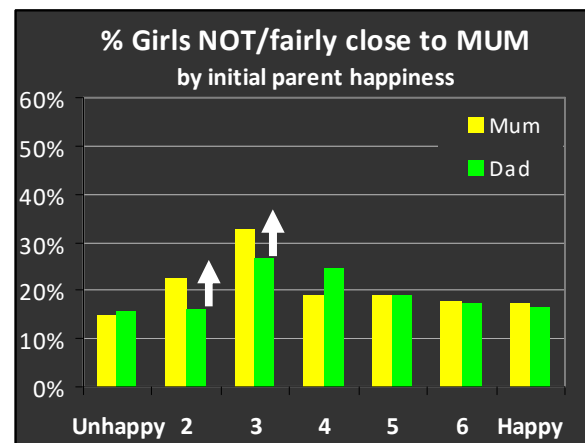
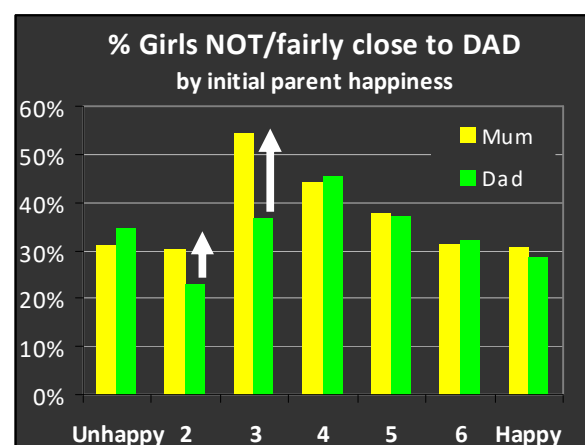


Chart 7 shows a similar phenomenon between teenage girls and their father, where girls tend to be less close to their dad when either parent initially reported middle of the scale relationship happiness.

However using the same scales shows the higher proportion of girls who are less close to their dads (**Chart 7**) compared to their mums (**Chart 6**).

Once again there is also evidence that less happy mums have more impact on subsequent closeness than less happy dads, where the yellow columns are higher than the green columns where parents report initial parent happiness of 2-3.

Chart 7



These patterns are similar in the relationships between boys and their parents – not shown.

However there are fewer obvious differences between the yellow and green columns, suggesting less influence of happy mum rather than happy dad on boys' closeness to either parent.

After taking into account mother's age, ethnicity, education and marital status at wave one, **Table 6** shows that the happiness of both mother and father with their relationship has a unique impact on the subsequent closeness to mum for boys, but only the mother's happiness affects her subsequent closeness to girls.

Table 6
Factors that predict closeness to mum at W6

At child's birth	Girls		Boys	
	Wald	Sig.	Wald	Sig.
Father left home	18	***	1	ns
Mum's happiness	16	*	18	**
Marital status	9	*	8	*
Dad's happiness	9	ns	24	**
Mum's ethnicity	4	ns	14	*
Mum's education	1	ns	2	ns
Mum's age	1	ns	0	ns

However these effects are only statistically significant for very specific levels of happiness, see **Table 7** below.

The odds of mum being close to her teenage son are 35 per cent higher if the dad initially scored 7 out of 7 for happiness and 33 per cent lower if the mum scores 4 out of 7.

The odds of mum being close to her teenage daughter are 41 per cent lower if the mum initially scored 3 out of 7.

No other levels of happiness were statistically significant.

Table 7
Parent happiness & subsequent closeness to mum
Odds ratios, comparison is parents who are 6 / 7

At child's birth	Boys		Girls	
	Mum	Dad	Mum	Dad
Unhappy	12%	40%	-20%	-20%
2	0%	0%	-24%	13%
3	-22%	-32%	-41%	6%
4	-33%	24%	-10%	-15%
5	-10%	6%	-12%	-1%
6	Comparison Group			
Happy	11%	35%	8%	16%

4. Subsequent teenage mental health

And finally our fourth analysis looks at mother and father happiness and the subsequent presence or absence of high levels of any of four measures of teenage mental health problems.

Parents report mental health problems through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, a 25 item survey that assesses levels of Emotion, Hyperactivity, Peer, Conduct and Prosocial problems.

Our measure looks at whether or not high levels of any of the first four problems are present.

Chart 8 below shows the relationship between initial parent happiness and subsequent high levels of any problem for boys.

Chart 9 shows the relationship for girls.

Chart 8

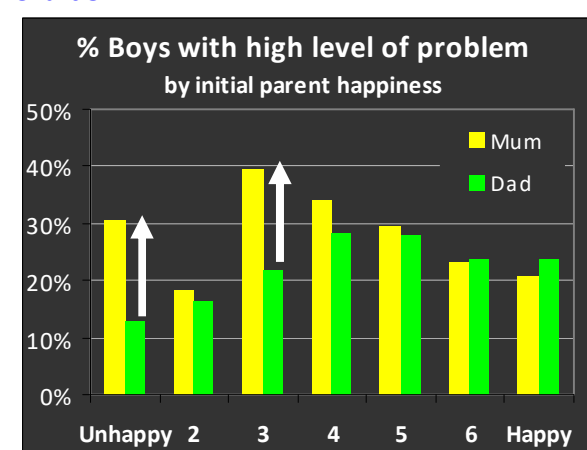
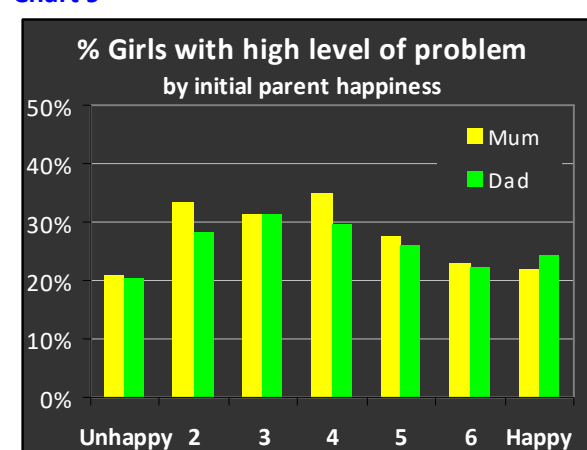


Chart 9



Both charts show similar curvilinear patterns, where the teenagers of parents who report initial mid levels of happiness are more likely to indicate high levels of mental health problems, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

For boys, the greatest risk of problems occurs where mothers scored 3-4 for initial relationship happiness and where father scored 4-5.

For girls, the greatest risk of problems occurs where either mother or father scored 2-4 for initial relationship happiness.

Taking into account mother's age, education, ethnicity, marital status at nine months, and whether the father is still living in the house at 14 years, **Table 8** shows that mother's initial happiness has a significant influence on both boys and girls subsequent risk of mental health problems.

However father's initial happiness has a significant influence on boys but not girls. The lower Wald numbers show that the influence of father's happiness is less than mother's happiness for both boys and girls.

Table 8
Factors that predict teenage problems at W6

At child's birth	Girls		Boys	
	Wald	Sig.	Wald	Sig.
Father left home	34	***	36	***
Mum's happiness	23	**	42	***
Mum's education	20	***	14	***
Mum's ethnicity	19	**	6	ns
Dad's happiness	6	ns	20	**
Marital status	5	ns	23	***
Mum's age	0	ns	7	**

DISCUSSION

Is there any truth to the saying 'Happy Wife, Happy Life'?

In this study, we compared the happiness of mothers and fathers with their relationship as new parents with four family outcomes: the subsequent happiness of the couple relationship; the subsequent stability of the couple relationship; the subsequent closeness of the relationship between parent and child; and the subsequent likelihood of the child displaying high levels of mental health problems.

For this we used the Millennium Cohort Study, following only those families who started off as intact couples and who could therefore report relationship happiness nine months into parenthood.

In terms of subsequent happiness, we found a weak but highly significant correlation between both mother and father present and future happiness.

The happiness of mothers early on was a stronger predictor of their own happiness later on than was the happiness of fathers. However none of these links explained more than 3 per cent of the variance.

So although a happy mum with a new born is slightly more likely than a happy dad to remain happy fourteen years later, the link over time is fairly weak.

It seems likely that a major reason for this is that most people start off happy and stay that way.

In terms of couple stability, the relationship happiness of both mother and father early on are both strong predictors of whether a couple will still be together when their children are teenagers, even after taking into account mother's age, education, ethnicity, and whether or not she was married when the baby was nine months old.

However mother's happiness is twice as strong a predictor as father's happiness. And whereas the extremes of happiness and unhappiness are linked to future stability for mothers, this is not the case for fathers.

In terms of closeness to their teenage son or daughter, the relationship happiness of mothers when the child is nine months old is one of the major influences.

This is after taking into account the mother's age, education, ethnicity, marital status and whether the couple stayed together or not.

Father's happiness with the relationship is also a major influence on the mother's subsequent closeness to her son though not to her daughter.

For daughters, the key influence on closeness to her mother is whether the parents have split up or not. However this is not a factor for sons' closeness to their mother.

And finally, in terms of the risk of subsequent mental health problems for their teenagers, the relationship happiness of mothers when the child is nine months old is a major influence for both sons and daughters.

This takes into account the same background factors as before.

However father's happiness with the relationship is a major influence on their son's future mental health, but not their daughter.

So in summary, the happiness of both mothers and fathers early on in parenthood is strongly related to a range of family outcomes over the next fourteen years.

Mother's happiness influences her own subsequent happiness, the stability of her relationship as a couple, the closeness of her relationship with either teenage son or teenage daughter, and the mental health of either teenage son or daughter.

Father's happiness influences his own subsequent happiness and stability, though both to a lesser extent than does mother's happiness.

Father's happiness also influences the mother's subsequent closeness to her teenage son, though not to her daughter, and also the mental health of his teenage son, though not his daughter.

Mother's happiness is thus the more robust indicator, providing compelling evidence in support of the expression '**Happy Wife, Happy Life**'.

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