



Marriage Foundation

Get married for the sake of the children

Harry Benson, December 2020

- Marriage boosts stability for parents and acts as a buffer against problems for children. This is especially true today now that divorce rates are at their lowest level in 50 years.
- Although some of the advantages of marriage are due to selection – ‘the kind of people who marry’ – marriage remains a major protective factor even after taking background into account.
- Commitment theory offers the most plausible explanation of a causal link, highlighting how the act of marriage represents an active decision, clear signal of commitment and removal of ambiguity. The result is that living together and having children affirm and boost parents’ dedication to one another rather than merely acting as a constraint and potential trap.
- According to the Office for National Statistics, up to 1.3 million cohabiting couple families with 2.2 million dependent children will share Christmas together this year in England and Wales.
- Using three different methods of calculating family breakdown, I would expect 75% of these families still to be intact in five years time. However were all of these families to make their commitment more explicit, in line with their married counterparts, their relationship survival rate could improve to as much as 93%.
- Were all currently cohabiting parents to marry or enter civil partnership (thereby also gaining the legal rights and protection that they currently lack), an additional 80,000 to 227,000 families could stay together over the next five years and avoid the unnecessary experience of family breakdown for between 134,000 and 382,000 children.

ANNUALISED FAMILY BREAKDOWN

	Children of divorced couples (ONS 2013 & 2019)	USoc 2009-2012 (Benson 2013)	USoc 2009-2010 (Benson 2015)	Mean
Married	1.2%	1.3%	2.0%	1.5%
Cohab		5.3%	4.6%	5.0%

I have used three different methods to estimate breakdown rates over five years.

1. ONS data on divorces involving children suggests that 1.2% of married parents divorced in 2013 (ONS 2013, 2019)
2. Our comparison of break-ups 2009-2012 found that 1.3% of married and 5.3% of cohabiting parents split up annually (Benson 2013)
3. Our analysis of parents with teens in 2009-2010 found that couples broke up at an annualised rate of 2.0% for married and 4.6% for cohabiting parents (Benson 2015a)

FAMILY SURVIVAL & BREAK-UP OVER 5 YEARS

Status now		5 year survival rate	Intact 5 years later	Break up within 5 years
	Number '000		Number '000	Number '000
Married Parents	4,935	93%	4,570	365
Married Children	9,047	93%	8,377	670
Cohab Parents	1,307	75%	984	323
Cohab Children	2,203	75%	1,658	545

This produces a mean survival rate of 93% for married parents and 75% for cohabiting parents over five years.

POTENTIAL REDUCTION IN FAMILY BREAKDOWN

	Annual From	To	Reduce by	Parents '000	Children '000
Low	5.0%	3.7%	-25%	-80	-227
High	5.0%	1.5%	-70%	-134	-382

Were cohabiting parents to acquire similar levels of commitment – and thus stability – to married parents, levels of family breakdown could reduce by anywhere between 25% and 70%, benefitting thousands of couples and their children.

The case for getting married

Everybody wants reliable love. Adults want it. Children want it.

So it's in everybody's interests to find out what gives us our best chance of achieving this.

Commitment theory proposes two forces or bonds that keep couples together (*Stanley et al 2006*).

DEDICATION is the internal bond between two people representing their new identity as a couple with a future.

The strength of the bond depends on how much they have bought into this identity and future plan, how much they **WANT** to be together.

CONSTRAINTS are the external forces acting on the couple from outside making it harder for them to leave, should either wish to do so.

Every relationship transition – such as telling friends, moving in together, having a baby, getting married – adds new constraints making the relationship ever more complex and hard to unravel. Time together and their shared history entrench this inertia, the strength of which determines how much they **HAVE** to be together.

For most people, getting married represents the ultimate step of dedication. The agreement to spend the rest of their lives together requires a mutual decision by the couple that removes any lingering ambiguity and sends a clear signal that puts them very obviously on the same page.

The plan is to stay together for life. It may not work out. Not all do. But that's the plan. No business is successful without a clear plan. Why should relationships be any different?

Celebration of that plan at a wedding gives a couple affirmation that they have made a good choice. After all, choosing to commit to one person for life means choosing to exclude all other possible choices. This is the great risk of commitment, which is why the support and accountability of friends and family is important.

The consequence is that most marriages are successful. Most stay happy and most last for life.

Up until the 1970s, when the contraceptive pill became widely available, cohabiting was rare. Couples met up, fell in love, found out about one another, and only then got married, moved in together and had children, in that order.

Commitment – i.e. dedication – preceded sex, marriage, cohabiting and children.

Birth control broke this link for the first time in human history, making it possible to cohabit without the risk of pregnancy.

Today cohabiting has become socially accepted, whether as an alternative to marriage, a stepping stone to marriage, or even a temporary living arrangement.

The problem is that human nature and the rules of commitment have not changed.

Relationships thrive when there is clarity and a plan. They risk getting stuck when they put the constraints of cohabiting before the clarity of dedication. They risk failure when there is ambiguity and possible asymmetry.

This is the problem for cohabiting couples who haven't yet married. Living together and having children together on their own are not sufficient evidence of a clearly decided and agreed plan to spend the rest of their lives together.

Of course some couples – the minority – do make their relationship last for life without a formal step of commitment. And well done them. The chances are they have made a plan and told friends behind the scenes.

But if you are cohabiting and haven't had that conversation about your future together, if you haven't agreed to that plan, if you haven't had the affirmation of family and friends, you can't be absolutely sure that your partner is as committed as you.

Why wouldn't anyone want to know that?

Yes I know some people have an ideological objection to marriage. Then form a civil partnership. Although new and untested, the psychological process appears very much marriage under a different name.

Yes I know many are put off by the perceived need for an expensive wedding. You don't need that. Two American studies have shown that it's who you have and not what you spend that counts. Having more friends and family at a wedding is linked to higher quality and stability of marriage. Unnecessary extravagance is not.

You want reliable love and so do your children. You should also want legal protection.

So get married both for your own sake and theirs.

Selected research findings

• Commitment depends on clear decisions

In a study of young unmarried couples, the factors that predicted who would still be together a year later all involved deliberate mutual 'deciding' about the future – such as joint club membership, buying a house together, getting a pet. What did not predict future stability was whether they lived together or had a baby, either of which can happen as much through 'sliding' as 'deciding'

(Rhoades et al 2010)

• Men's commitment usually requires an intentional decision

Whereas women's commitment seems to be more about attachment or bonding, men's commitment seems to be more about making the decision for themselves, not just succumbing to social or family pressure. This study is one of several that found men who moved in before getting engaged were significantly less committed in their early years of marriage compared to men who moved in only after they had got engaged. This was not true for women.

(Rhoades et al 2006)

• Couples who marry are more likely to stay together

Many studies confirm that most marriages stay together whereas only a minority of unmarried cohabiting couples do so. Our own studies for Marriage Foundation show that marriage is one of the major factors distinguishing couples who stay together from those who don't. We compared parents with children of the same age, and took into account background factors such as parents age, education, ethnicity and religion, even including relationship happiness after the baby was born – which may of course be linked to the clarity or ambiguity of commitment in the first place.

(Benson & McKay 2016, 2018)

• Making a plan also matters for births

In one of our analyses of parent stability over time, we investigated the effect of having a planned birth. Not surprisingly, these were more common among married parents than cohabiting parents. The surprise was that having a planned

birth made an additional unique difference to stability even after taking marriage into account.

(Benson & McKay 2018)

• Marriage is stronger because the men who marry really mean it

As social pressure to marry has gradually disappeared, so has the stability of couples who marry improved over time. Almost all the decline in divorce rates is due to fewer wives filing for divorce in the early years of marriage. This is almost certainly because fewer men now 'slide' into marriage due to social or family pressure. Those men who marry are 'deciders'.

(Benson 2015b, 2019)

• The ceremony matters

Two American studies have found that having more guests and spending less money at the wedding is linked to subsequent stronger marriage. A plausible explanation for this is that spending more money risks future debt and conflict for the couple whereas having more guests affirms the risk of committing to one person for life and closing down all other choices

(Francis-Tan & Mialon 2015, Rhoades & Stanley 2014)

• Children benefit if their parents stay together

In two separate studies for Marriage Foundation, we have found clear evidence that having married parents boosts teenage self-esteem and that family breakdown is one of the biggest risk factors in predicting teenage mental health problems. In each of these analyses, we controlled for background factors such as parent age and education.

(Benson & James 2016, Benson & McKay 2017)

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