

**Press Release from the Marriage Foundation**

**Release Date: Immediate**

**Give the gift of marriage this Christmas, judge tells unmarried parents**

* **Study predicts quarter of cohabiting parents will break up within five years**
* **Commitment of marriage and civil partnerships reduces breakdown by up to 70 per cent when compared to cohabiting parents**

Give the gift of marriage this Christmas, a top judge and family court expert tells unmarried parents.

The judge, Sir Paul Coleridge, who founded the Marriage Foundation, made the comments ahead of the publication of a new study that finds marriage and civil partnerships significantly boosts stability for parents, acts as a buffer against problems for children and increases levels of commitment.

Using three separate data sets from ONS and the National Survey Understand Society to compare break-up rates of married parents and cohabiting parents the study estimates 1.5 per cent of married and 5.0 per cent of cohabiting parents split up annually. Put another way, after fives years 93 per cent of married parents will still be together in five years time compared with just three quarters, (75 per cent) of cohabiting parents.

“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 per cent and 70 per cent, benefitting thousands of couples and their children”, it says.

Sir Paul commented: “If all currently cohabiting parents were to replicate this level of stability whether through marriage or civil partnership it is possible that an additional 80,000 to 227,000 families would stay together over the next five years and avoid the unnecessary experience of family breakdown and heartbreak for between 134,000 and 382,000 children - Heartbreak that is all too familiar to anyone involved in our family courts.

“This is why I would urge all cohabiting parents to make a clear and unambiguous commitment to one another and give their partner the gift of marriage this Christmas.”

The study, while acknowledging that 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, a clear signal of commitment and removal of ambiguity allowing the constraints of cohabitation and children to affirm rather than to trap,” it says.

“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 is not sufficient evidence of a clearly decided and agreed plan to spend the rest of their lives together.”

Harry Benson, the Marriage Foundation’s Research Director, commented: “I am a huge fan of marriage not because of some outdated sense of tradition or ideology, but because the psychology of marriage goes so strongly with the grain of human behaviour.

“We all want our relationships and families to succeed. But the single biggest enemy of our success is ambiguity. I can be as committed as I like to you but if I'm not absolutely clear that you are as well its bound to affect our relationship. I'll doubt more. I'll be more uncertain. I'll be less open and more defensive. Our relationship will suffer.

“We've seen this so clearly in our analysis of how parents coped with lockdown. Cohabiting mothers were by far the most stressed parents because of living with partners whose commitment was least clear.

“And we've seen it in how children respond when their parents relationship breakdown, the single biggest predictor of subsequent teenage mental health problems.

“This new analysis shows how family breakdown is so much higher among parents who aren't married. What we are saying is make your commitment to one another crystal clear and you remove the risk that ambiguity can undermine your relationship. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

Sir Paul concluded: “Family breakdown remains a major challenge for the UK. Children from broken homes have poorer educational and health outcomes, are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, while the price tag for picking up the pieces is estimated to be an eyewatering £51bn per annum[[1]](#footnote-1). This is why as a society, we can't remain passive and the Government must reward commitment and stability offered by marriage and devise policies that encourage the country’s 3.4 million cohabiting couples deepen their commitment to one another and ultimately to tie the knot.”

**ENDS**

**About Marriage Foundation**

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 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. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

For all media enquiries, please contact Alistair Thompson on 07970 162225

1. <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CSJJ8372-Family-structure-Report-200807.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)