



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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Marriage identified as key indicator for predicting GCSE Maths and English results for girls, finds groundbreaking study

Marriage and mother's education have been identified as key indicators for predicting good GCSE results in English and Maths at grade C or above, finds a groundbreaking study from Marriage Foundation.

The study, by Harry Benson at Marriage Foundation and Professor Steve McKay at University of Lincoln, looked at nearly 6,500 children born between 2000-2002 from the Millennium Cohort Study, including 5,145 children born to couples. It found that the probability of passing both Maths and English GCSE at grade C/4 or above was influenced uniquely for boys by his mother's education level and his closeness to his mother at age 14; and for girls by whether her mother was married when she was born, her mother's housing tenure soon after she was born, and whether her parents were still together when she was aged 17.

It found that children born to mothers with a degree were *most* likely to achieve English and Maths GCSEs (82 per cent of boys and 84 per cent of girls). While those born to mothers with less than GCSE level education were *least* likely (52 per cent of boys and 64 per cent of girls).

And children born to parents who were already married were *most* likely to achieve English and Maths GCSEs (74 per cent of boys and 81 per cent of girls). By contrast those children born to single parents were *least* likely (46 per cent of boys and 63 per cent of girls), although the study pointed out this was mostly due to the economic circumstances of single parenthood.

The cutting-edge research challenges the long-established view that wealth is the principal indicator for GCSE results. While acknowledging that family economics is an important influencer for both boys and girls, family relationships also matter for boys and family structure also matters for girls.

Interestingly the study found family 'culture' (ethnicity, religion, grandparent status), mother's relationship choices (ante-natal classes, planned pregnancy, previous partners), and parent relationship timing (age, time co-resident, birth order) had no discernible effect.

Harry Benson, research director of Marriage Foundation, commented: "The traditional narrative has been that household wealth, how rich your parents were, was the key or determining factor in exam results. This study proves this is not the case and that marriage and family factors, which are all too often overlooked, matter.

"This groundbreaking study, alongside other work, provides a powerful and continual critique to those who think that marriage and family stability are unimportant. It should also sound the alarm bells for policy makers that marriage rates continue to drop among the poorest couples."

The report continues: "GCSE results matter because they are related to subsequent participation in higher education and the labour market. The factors that predict GCSE results are therefore of great policy importance," the report says.

"It is well-established that children's GCSE results are linked to socio-economic class, whether by parents' occupation, education or housing tenure. The educational background of both mothers and fathers is important.

"An indication of how little attention is paid by researchers or policy makers to family relationships comes in a 2014 review paper for the Department for Education 'about the factors that influence students' GCSE results and their academic progress across five years of secondary schooling from Year 6 to Year 11.'

"Within this 264-page document, there is just one mention of 'parenting', two mentions of 'father's qualifications', seven mentions of 'mother's age and qualification'. The only relationships mentioned are between student and teacher. There is no mention whatsoever of 'family', 'marriage', 'couple', 'stability' or 'lone parent'.

Mr Benson added “Our robust analysis shows the importance of *both* family economics *and* family relationships on subsequent GCSE results. In particular, these findings emphasise the central role of marriage on educational outcomes for girls in particular and show yet again the folly of airbrushing of marriage from public policy and research.”

Sir Paul Coleridge former Family High Court Judge and founder of Marriage Foundation added “As every experienced teacher will tell you there is no single silver bullet or litmus paper test which can determine or predict educational achievement in advance. Children, and the influences on children as they develop, are complex and multi faceted. Children born with every material advantage can and do regularly fail. However this new and subtle research also demonstrates what every experienced teacher knows namely, that what is going on, on the ground in the family home, is highly influential in a child’s educational outcome regardless of wealth. It is an inconvenient truth for policy makers that in this vital area of educational attainment, child/parent relationships and especially family stability are also key drivers of success. And over the years Marriage Foundation has repeatedly demonstrated that statistically speaking marriage is far more likely to produce that stable and favourable environment for the teenage exam-taking child.”

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Notes to editors

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.

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