



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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84 per cent parents who are together when their child turns 14 are married, finds major new study

Five out of every six parents of 14-year-old children who are still together as a couple are married, finds major new study from Marriage Foundation. Despite the trend away from marriage, just 16 per cent of intact couples with teenagers have never married.

The report, *Sources of family breakdown in the UK*, tracked 4,476 mothers with children born between 2000-2002 from the Millennium Cohort Study. The data paints a depressing picture of family breakdown in the UK. It highlights changes to household composition, with parents who cohabit but never marry the most likely to separate by the time their child turns 14 - 60 per cent compared to just 21 per cent of couples who married before the birth of their first child and 32 per cent of parents who married after.

Even after controlling for a wide range of background factors such as ethnicity, age, time lived together, education and relationship happiness, the probability of splitting up was still 46 per cent for never married parents, significantly higher than the 26 per cent for those marrying before the birth of their first child and 27 per cent for those marrying after.

The report also found that divorce accounts for less than a third of all family breakdown in the UK, rising from just 10 per cent of breakdown involving first-born children aged 3 to 31 per cent of breakdown involving children aged 14.

Harry Benson, research director of Marriage Foundation and author of the report, commented: "This detailed study, which followed thousands of families in the Millennium Cohort Study, yet again shows the simple truth that marriage matters. There are many reasons why this is the

case, but at its simplest level this is because the act of marriage involves a clear mutual decision about your future together. It sends a big signal that puts both people on the same page and removes any lingering doubts and ambiguities.

“Marriage provides relationship clarity and encourages good things like sacrifice and forgiveness, which are so important when children are involved. This is why couples who have tied the knot tend to be more stable and more likely to weather the challenges that life throws at them. This is why marriage accounts for lower levels of family breakdown than other less stable forms of relationship. No wonder a huge majority of couples who are still together by the time their children become teenagers are married.”

“Marriage and divorce statistics present an open goal for a story-hungry media. In almost all of the 100 or so pieces of media coverage each year involving Marriage Foundation, marriage and divorce statistics are also cited. Family data and their interpretation are our business,” the report says.

“As the headlines previously quoted show, negative stories about ‘high divorce rates’ and ‘rising divorce’ make good copy, invariably exaggerating short-term comparisons which are easy to calculate from national data.

“The harder to calculate long-term data tell a different story. Our research shows that divorce rates are down by up to half among newlyweds over the past 25 years and down by a quarter overall from their peak. The change is almost entirely due to fewer divorces granted to wives, with divorce rates now back to levels not seen since the 1960s.

“Hardest of all is analysis of data from surveys that allow comparison of couples who get married with couples who don’t. These studies are difficult to do but produce far more interesting findings. For example, in a series of analyses, we have shown that married parents are less likely to split up by the time their children are teenagers, less likely to split up in any given year regardless of income, and less likely to say their relationship deteriorated during lockdown.

“Their teenage sons are less likely to experience mental health problems, their teenage girls are more likely to achieve both maths and English GCSE, and their adult children are more likely to go to university and less likely ever to need benefits.”

The report goes on to explain the detailed methodology that has been used to track family breakdown from the 18,000 or so mothers who were originally part of the Millennium Cohort study, excluding those on a second marriage, or who already had children. This gave a total sample size of 6,668, reduced slowly over time due to survey non-response.

The report continues: “By age 3 years, 26 per cent of children were not living with both natural parents. Perhaps not surprisingly 18 per cent of this 26 per cent is accounted for by mothers

not living with the father when the child was born. Married mothers account for 2 per cent whereas cohabiting mothers account for 6 per cent.

“By age 14 years, 46 per cent of children were not living with both natural parents. Married mothers accounted for 14 per cent out, cohabiting mothers account for 13 per cent, and single mothers the remaining 19 per cent...

“Among the 54 per cent of children still living with both natural parents, 84 per cent live with parents who are married.”

It concludes: “...most family breakdown does not involve divorce at all and that most couples who stay together are married.”

Harry Benson, continued: “This report yet again challenges the Government and all politicians who say they are concerned with the impact of family breakdown as to why they are not doing more to support marriage. Whether through the punitive couple penalty, perceived high wedding costs or simply an inexplicable refusal to acknowledge the benefits of marriage, our leaders are failing to support the thousands and thousands of young couples who still aspire to marry.

“It is particularly galling, when you realise that the vast majority of senior politicians, government ministers, or shadow ministers are married themselves, so why won’t they stick up for marriage?”

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of Marriage Foundation added: “Every experienced parent knows that if adolescents are to successfully navigate the scary teenage years they need a secure and a stable family environment. This new research is full of striking stats but for me two stand out. Firstly, by age 14 nearly half the nation’s children are not living with both their natural parents, in itself very concerning. However of those who are still together the vast majority (84%) have married parents. A paltry 16% of intact couples get to this crucial period unmarried. The moral of the story is that if you want to experience the rich rewards of fully enjoying your children through their tricky teenage years marrying the other parent is a crucial first step.

“The second myth which this research yet again debunks is that family breakdown is mostly about married couples getting divorced. Just not true. The unchallenged fact is that divorce rates have been dropping for decades and, as a consequence, if you marry today you will probably still be married for the rest of your life. Family breakdown is three times more common amongst unmarried couples. Perhaps one day we shall be blessed with a government who take these graphic statistics seriously and, by clear policies, support marriage unequivocally.”

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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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