

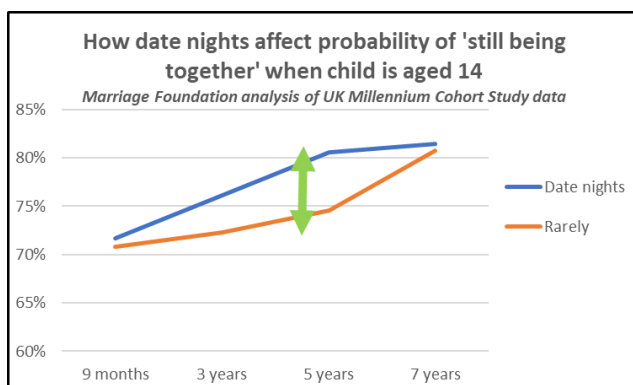


Marriage Foundation

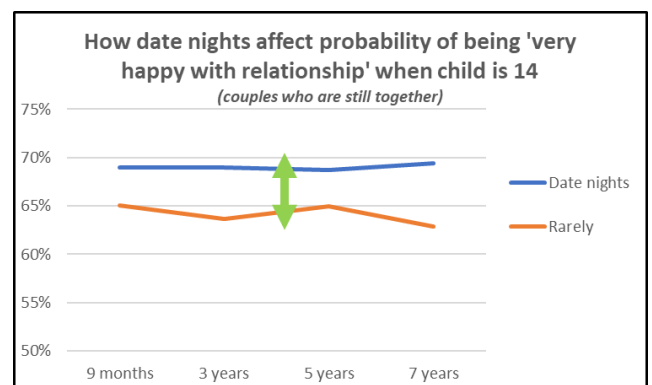
Date nights save relationships

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

- Relationship educators often recommend that couples go on regular 'Date Nights' to keep their relationship alive and healthy. But is there any evidence from research that they work?
- The answer is an emphatic yes.
- For this analysis, I used data from up to 6,420 couples in the Millennium Cohort Study whose children were born in the years 2000 to 2002. The parents were interviewed at 9 months, 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14 years. The sample is weighted so that it fairly represents the population of the UK.
- Parents who went on 'date nights' at any stage of parenthood were significantly more likely to be happier with their relationship and satisfied with life when their child was aged 14. Those who went on date nights when their children were aged between 3 and 5 years old were also significantly more likely to remain together.
- These findings held true regardless of a wide range of other factors, including whether couples were ever married, their age, ethnicity, education and income, their relationship history and their initial relationship happiness soon after their child was born.
- Yet above and beyond all these factors, date nights made an additional difference. What this strongly suggests is that being intentional about your couple relationship when your children are still quite young pays real dividends in later years.
- According to the Census, 1.5 million couples in England & Wales had children aged 3 to 5. My analysis suggests 1.1 million of these couples go on some sort of date night. Net of all other factors, date nights reduce the probability of family breakdown by 20 percent. If the other 420,000 couples made time for a date night, in theory 23,000 relationships could be saved.



Net of background factors, the typical couple who went on date nights when their child was aged 3 or 5 increased their probability of staying together by 4-6 percent. For comparison, being married added 10-11 percent.



For the typical couple who was still together when their child was aged 14, date nights at any stage between 9 months and 7 years also increased their probability of being 'very happy' with their relationship by 4-6 percent.

Introduction

Everyone wants reliable love. But everyone also knows that not all relationships remain that way.

Family breakdown is at near-epidemic levels. The clearest indicator of this is that 44-46 percent of today's teenagers do not live with both natural parents (*Benson 2023, Kiernan et al 2022*). The source is roughly one third from marriages that end and two thirds from cohabiting or other relationships that end.

Relationship commentators and marriage courses often recommend that couples keep their love alive through regular "date nights".

The rationale seems sensible.

Weekdays are filled with work and childcare. Going out together in the evening is a chance to focus on one another and connect with what's important. After all, the children are supposed to leave home at some point whereas the parents have the possibility of a whole lifetime together.

But do "date nights" make a real difference? And how often do date nights need to take place to optimise this? Or are date nights just a symptom of the state of the relationship and, in reality, other factors are much more important?

These are the questions I sought to address in my analysis, which extends a previous study we did for Marriage Foundation (*Benson & McKay 2016*).

Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, I was able to look at couples' frequency of date nights when their child was nine months, three years, five years and seven years old, and see if there was any link to their later stability, life satisfaction and relationship happiness when their child was fourteen years old.

I am aware of other papers that have discussed date nights (*Brower et al 2016, Wilcox & Dew 2012*). However, to my knowledge, this is the first time that the effectiveness of date nights at different stages of parenthood has ever been assessed empirically over the long term with a large sample of couples.

My working hypothesis was that marriage and socio-economic factors would influence whether couples stayed together or not. However once these and other factors were taken into account, I did not expect date nights – on their own – to have a significant net effect on later outcomes.

Method

My analysis started with 6,420 couples with children from the Millennium Cohort Study. These children were all born in 2000-2002. The parents were surveyed when the child was 9 months old, then at age 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14 (UCL 2020, 2021 and others).

The key date night questions – the independent variable – were asked in the first 4 waves, up to age 7. 'How often do you go out as a couple?' The answers ranged from 'once a week or more', 'once a month or more', 'less often' or 'hardly ever/never'. They were also asked a variety of questions about their background – including age, education, and whether they were married or not – as well as about the quality of the relationship.

The key relationship outcomes at age 14 – the dependent variables – were whether the couple were still together, how they rated their life satisfaction, and how happy they were in their relationship. This last outcome only applied to couples who had stayed together.

My analyses used sophisticated regression models that identify the unique importance of each individual factor, net of all other factors. Models were also weighted to make the sample representative of the wider UK population. I also imputed the values of missing data to deal with the serious problem that up to one quarter of the sample did not answer one or more questions. This is a well-established method that significantly improves the representativeness of the sample (*Mostafa & Wiggins 2014, Stavseth et al 2019*). These methods build on work I am doing for my PhD at the University of Bristol.

Other variables were whether the parents ever married, their ethnicity, religion, education, employment, family history, partnership history, age, time together, happiness with relationship after the child was born, psychological distress, whether parents had ever experienced use of force, family income and housing, and whether the mother planned pregnancy, attended ante-natal class, or smoked during pregnancy.

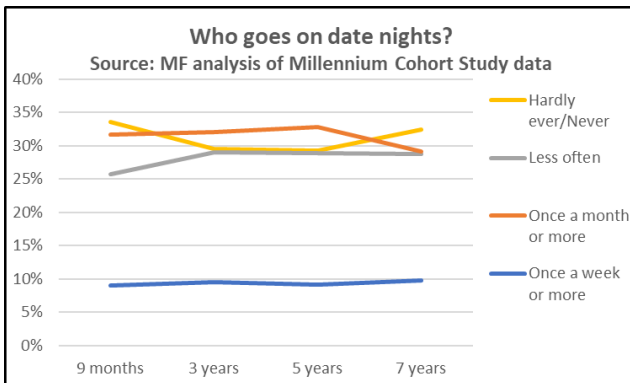
Results

Although the sample begins with 6,420 couples, some analyses involved fewer couples because not all couples answered questions on date

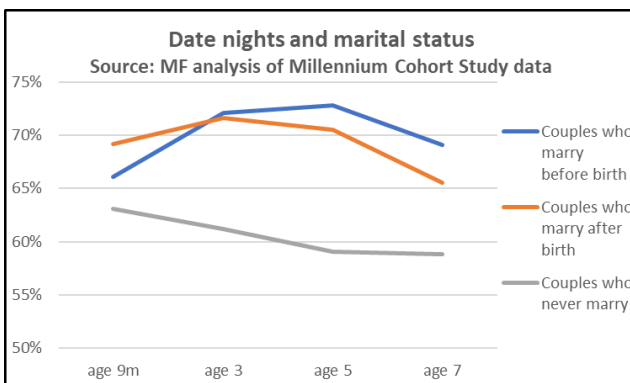
nights or later satisfaction. These missing data clearly could not be imputed because they involved the key variables of interest and did not affect the results.

Who goes on date nights?

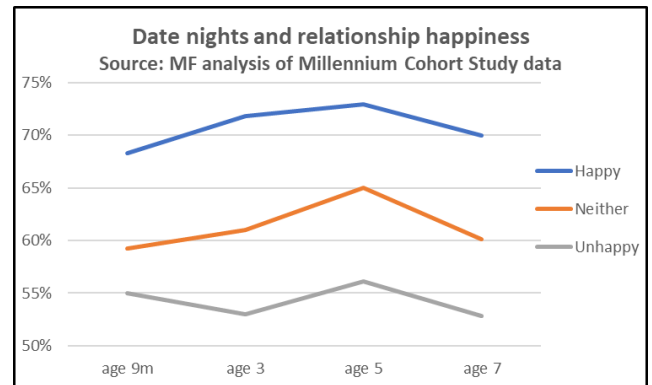
Frequency of date nights varied little from 9 months to 7 years. Roughly two thirds of couples went on some sort of date night while one third didn't. Between 9 and 10 percent went weekly, 29 to 33 percent went monthly and 26 to 29 percent went less often. Between 29 and 34 percent of couples hardly ever or never went on date nights.



Couples who married before or after the birth of their child were more likely to go on date nights compared to couples who never married. This difference was especially pronounced when the child was aged 3 – 72 percent for married couples and 61 percent for never married couples – and age 5 – 71 to 73 percent for married couples and 59 percent for never married couples.



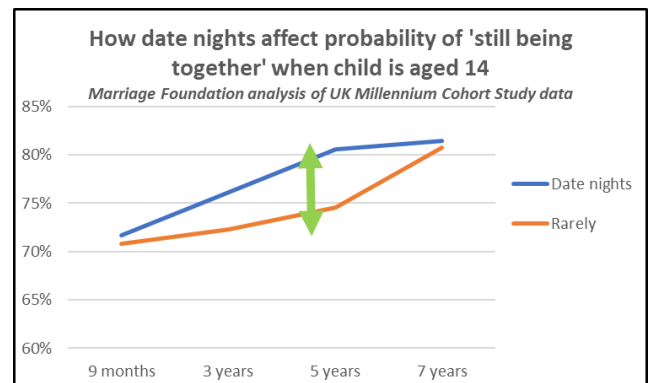
Couples who were happier with their relationship soon after the child is born were also more likely to go on a subsequent date night. At age 3, 72 percent of the initially happiest went on date nights compared to 53 percent of the initially unhappiest. At age 5, 73 percent of the initially happiest went on date nights compared to 56 percent of the initially unhappiest.



How do date nights affect stability?

In my analyses, I found no major differences in outcomes depending on how often couples went on date nights. From here on, I compared those who went on any kind of date at all with those who went rarely or not at all.

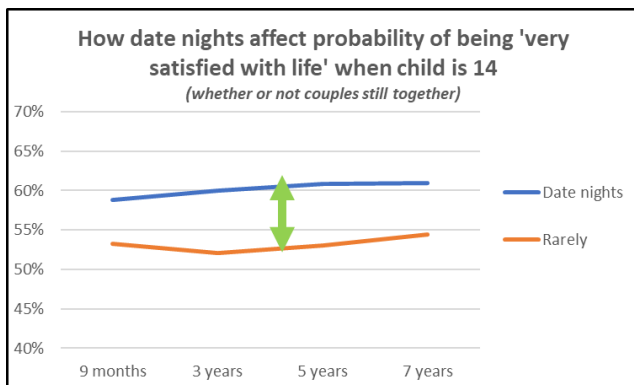
After taking all other factors into account, date nights when the child was aged either 9 months or 7 years old did not affect stability. Date nights when the child was aged 3 years increased the probability of staying together from 72 percent to 76 percent, a net gain of 3.8 percent. Date nights at 5 years boosted stability from 75 percent to 81 percent, a net gain of 6.0 percent.



How do date nights affect later life satisfaction?

After taking all other factors into account, date nights at any stage significantly increased the probability of reporting the highest rating of life satisfaction (rated 9-10 out of 10) when the child was aged 14.

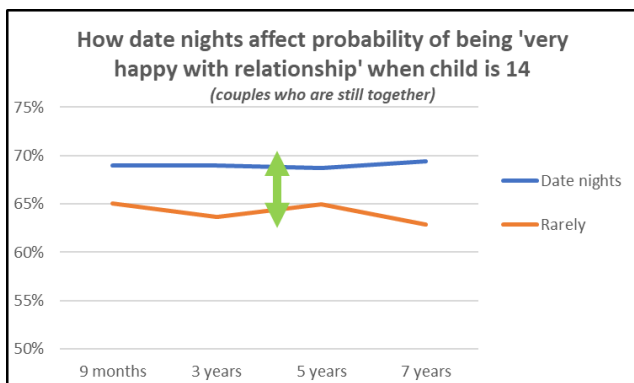
Date nights at 9 months boosted the probability of later satisfaction by 5.5 percent, at 3 years by 7.9 percent, at 5 years by 7.7 percent, and at 7 years by 6.5 percent. These differences were all significant. More details can be found in the table below.



How do date nights affect later relationship happiness?

Among couples who stayed together, date nights at any stage significantly increased the probability of reporting being very happy (rated 6-7 out of 7) when the child was aged 14.

Date nights at 9 months boosted the probability of being very happy at 14 years by 4.0 percent, at 3 years by 5.4 percent, at 5 years by 3.7 percent, and at 7 years by 6.5 percent. Once again, these differences were significant. More details can also be found in the table below.



| Probability that date nights boost relationship | | | | |
|---|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 9 months | 3 years | 5 years | 7 years |
| % Couples who stayed together | | | | |
| Date nights | 72% | 76% | 81% | 81% |
| Rarely | 71% | 72% | 75% | 81% |
| Boost | not sig | 3.8% | 6.0% | not sig |
| % Couples who are most satisfied | | | | |
| Date nights | 59% | 60% | 61% | 61% |
| Rarely | 53% | 52% | 53% | 54% |
| Boost | 5.5% | 7.9% | 7.7% | 6.5% |
| % Couples who are happiest (& who stayed together) | | | | |
| Date nights | 69% | 69% | 69% | 69% |
| Rarely | 65% | 64% | 65% | 63% |
| Boost | 4.0% | 5.4% | 3.7% | 6.5% |

Other factors

In my analysis, I took many other factors into consideration. Being married boosted the probability of staying together by 10-11 percent and of reporting the highest life satisfaction by between 6 and 9 percent. Being married did not influence relationship happiness at age 14, most likely because this equation only considered couples who were still together.

Other factors that influenced relationship outcomes included the following: family income and housing, whether the parents had previous partners, whether the grandparents stayed together, whether the mother was psychologically depressed after the child was born, and whether she had ever experienced force from her partner.

| Other factors affecting relationship by the time child is aged 14 | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|--|
| | Probability of staying together | Probability of being highly satisfied with life | Probability of being very happy with relationship* |
| Parents married | Yes | Yes | No |
| Parent ethnicity | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Parents religious | No | No | No |
| Grandparents ever divorced | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Mother has degree | No | No | No |
| Father has degree | Yes | No | No |
| Mother has job to return to | No | No | No |
| Family income when child born | Yes | No | Yes |
| Family housing when child born | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Mother attended ante-natal class | No | No | No |
| Mother planned pregnancy | Yes | Yes | No |
| Mother smoked during pregnancy | No | No | Yes |
| Father smoked during pregnancy | No | No | No |
| Parents had previous partners | Yes | No | No |
| Parents age when child born | Yes | Yes | No |
| Time parents lived together before child born | No | No | No |
| Mother happy with relationship after child born | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Father happy with relationship after child born | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Mother distressed after child born | No | Yes | Yes |
| Father distressed after child born | No | No | No |
| Mother had ever experienced force | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Father had ever experienced force | No | No | No |
| Child has a sibling | No | No | No |
| Number of couples in intital sample, n= | 6420 | 6298 | 4726 |

*Couples who are still together when child is aged 14

Why do date nights influence relationship outcomes?

The fact that date nights have any significant influence on subsequent relationship stability, life satisfaction and relationship happiness is remarkable. It suggests that the wide range of factors already taken into account in my analyses are missing a key ingredient that is being picked up by the act of going on a date night.

What I think a date night represents is a degree of intentionality about the couple relationship. Going out on the occasional date together, without children, suggests couples recognise the need to keep the fire going in their own

relationship. This intentionality has an important influence on the subsequent outcome of the relationship.

In my PhD at the University of Bristol, I discuss the intent behind marriages in terms of whether couples 'decide' or 'slide' into marriage (Stanley et al 2006). This is a crucial factor in commitment. The big national surveys don't include any specific questions about commitment that might pick up this kind of intentionality. Maybe 'date nights' are picking some of it up.

How many couples does this affect?

According to Census data from the Office for National Statistics, 1.5 million children aged 3-5 years old in England & Wales live with married or cohabiting parents. Because some of these children will be siblings, the total number of couples involved will be slightly lower. For the purpose of making a rough estimate of how many couples go on date nights, this is a usable figure.

Applying the findings from this analysis, I estimate that 1.09 million couples with children aged 3-5 years old go on some sort of date night while 420,000 couples do not.

Of those who go on a date night, 850,000 couples (78%) will stay together until their child is age 14. This probability is calculated net of all other factors, such as age and education. Of those who don't go on a date night, 310,000 couples (73%) will stay together.

Put another way, this means that 22% of date night couples will split up compared to 27% of non-date night couples. This reduction of 5.5% in the probability of splitting up in effect knocks 20% (5.5 divided by 27) off the risk of family breakdown.

In theory at least – and on the grand assumption that going on a date night makes a positive impact to your relationship above and beyond all other factors – if all couples went on reasonably regular date nights, an extra 23,000 couples would stay together who might otherwise have split up. This cycle would repeat every three years.

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