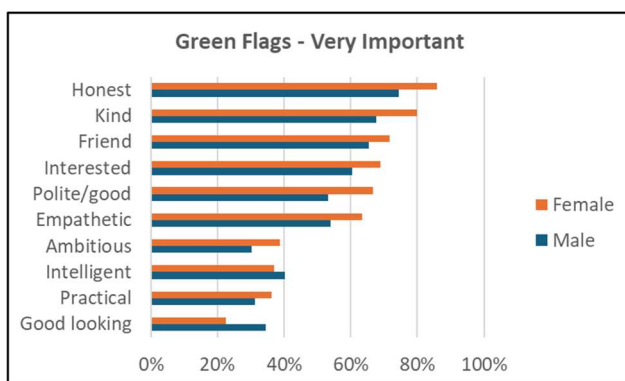# Green flags & Red flags

# What women and men really want

Harry Benson, October 2025

- For both men and women, character is the most important quality to look for in a relationship. More than half of young British adults aged 18-35 rate honesty, kindness, friendship, interest and being polite and good mannered as 'very important'. Looks and practicality were least important. For 86% of women and 74% of men, honesty is the number one green flag.

- While women were more likely than men to rate most of these qualities as 'very important', it was the other way round for the lowest rated quality. Looks were the only quality more important to men than women, rated 'very important' by 35% of men compared to 23% of women.

- In terms of qualities to avoid, more than half of women rated putdowns, whether in public or private, being flirty, and being not naturally good mannered, as 'showstoppers'. Although these were also the top red flags for men, more women than men picked them as 'showstoppers'.

- Public put downs were the number one red flag for 87% of women yet only 69% of men. This gender gap was repeated for private put downs, suggesting that the kind of negative banter than is often used between men does not go down at all well with women.

- Although women rate most red and green flags as more important than men (regardless of age, social class, marital status and religion), men and women tend to look for the same things in relationships – honesty, kindness, friendship, interest, politeness and empathy – and avoid the same things – putdowns in public or private, flirting, and bad manners.

- Married men and women were also more likely than their unmarried counterparts to rate politeness, empathy, ambition and intelligence as green flags. Married men and women were more likely to rate partnership history and being slow to commit as red flags.

- These are the key findings from our new survey of 2,000 young adults aged 18-35, conducted for Marriage Foundation by the polling company Whitestone.

Top green flags for men and women are honesty and kindness, then friendship, interest and politeness.
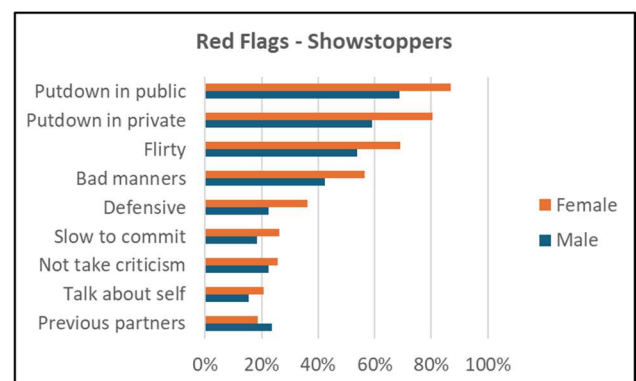
Top red flags for men and women are put downs in public or private, then being flirty, and bad manners.

Green flags

What do people look for in a partner? What are the green flags?

In the bestselling book "What mums want (and dads need to know)" that I wrote with my wife Kate and published in 2017, we did an impromptu survey of 300 mothers. We asked them to rate 29 characteristics they valued most in the father of their child. Top of the list were kindness, friendship, and being interested in me and our child. Although this was a good-sized sample, it was more indicative than representative. We also didn't ask men what they valued most.

So at Marriage Foundation, we commissioned the polling company Whitestone to conduct a nationally representative survey of 2,000 young adults aged 18-35. Among the 2,008 respondents, 51% were women and 49% men, 72% were in social classes ABC1 and 28% in social classes C2DE, 38% were aged 18-24, 25% aged 25-29 and 37% aged 30-34, 38% were Christian, 7% Muslim, and 47% not religious. All results were weighted to reflect the actual population.

In terms of 'green flags', we asked the question 'For you, how important or not are each of the following qualities in a partner/spouse?' Respondents could answer 'very important', 'fairly important', 'not particularly important' or 'not at all important'. Results are in the table below.

Green flags	Women	Men	Diff
Honest	86%	74%	*12%*
Kind	80%	68%	*12%*
Friend	72%	65%	*6%*
Interested	69%	60%	*8%*
Polite	67%	53%	*13%*
Empathetic	63%	54%	*9%*
Ambitious	39%	30%	*8%*
Intelligent	37%	40%	*-3%*
Practical	36%	31%	*5%*
Good looking	23%	35%	*-12%*
n=	1022	973	

Table shows % of women and men who rated each characteristic as 'very important'. Alternatives were 'fairly', 'not particularly', 'not at all'

For most characteristics, women were more likely than men to say they were 'very important'. The biggest green flag for women was honesty, rated by 86% of women as 'very important'. This was followed by kindness at 80%, friendship 72%, interest 69%, politeness 67%, and empathy 63%. Fewer than 4% rate any of these characteristics as 'not particularly' or 'not at all important'.

There is then a notable gap down to ambition, intelligence, being practical, and good looks, rated as 'very important' by fewer than 40% of women. A significant minority of women also regard these are 'not particularly important', with 22% rating looks as least important.

For men, the pattern is remarkably similar, with honesty, kindness, friendship and interest as the top green flags. Similarly, less than 9% rate any of these as not particularly important'. However, it is notable that fewer men than women rate any of these as 'very important'.

Among the less important characteristics, just as for women, are ambition, intelligence, being practical, and good looks. While only 30-40% of men rate these 'very important', more men also rate these 'not particularly important', with 29% of men rating ambition as least important.

Although there are some differences by age, social class and religion, the most notable are differences by gender and marital status. These are shown in the next table.

Green flags	Women			Men		
by marital status	Married	Couple	Single	Married	Couple	Single
Honest	86%	86%	85%	76%	76%	72%
Kind	80%	82%	78%	72%	62%	67%
Friend	74%	73%	68%	70%	60%	64%
Interested	71%	71%	66%	67%	53%	59%
Polite	69%	60%	70%	61%	50%	49%
Empathetic	67%	60%	64%	58%	47%	54%
Intelligent	49%	32%	35%	50%	33%	35%
Practical	47%	33%	32%	43%	24%	26%
Ambitious	47%	36%	36%	40%	24%	26%
Good looking	32%	17%	22%	46%	30%	28%
n=	251	356	414	335	213	426

Table shows % of women and men who rated each characteristic as 'very important'. Alternatives were 'fairly', 'not particularly', 'not at all'

Among women, those married are more likely to rate being intelligent, practical, ambitious and good looking as 'very important' compared to those in a relationship but not married. In each case the gap is greater than 10%. Among men, these gaps are present in all characteristics except honesty. The next table shows how women value almost all groups except looks (regardless of age, class, marital status and religion) while married people especially value five of the nine groups.

Green flag for:	Women	Men	Younger	Older	Richer	Married	Christian
Honest	✓			✓			
Kind	✓						
Friend	✓						
Interested	✓					✓	
Polite	✓						✓
Empathetic	✓						✓
Intelligent					✓	✓	✓
Practical	✓					✓	✓
Ambitious	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Good looking		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
n=	1022	973	769	739	277	587	764

Table shows those more likely to rate each characteristic as 'very important', using series of weighted logistic regressions that included sex, age, social class, marital status and religion. Comparison groups are men, age 24-30, social class A, single, and non-religious.

Red flags

In terms of 'red flags', we asked the question 'To what extent, if at all, would you see these behaviours as being relationship 'red flags'?' Respondents could answer 'showstopper', 'not ideal', 'wouldn't bother me' or 'not sure'. Results are in the table below.

Red flags	Women	Men	Diff
Putdown in public	87%	69%	*18%*
Putdown in private	81%	59%	*22%*
Flirty	69%	54%	*15%*
Bad manners	57%	43%	*14%*
Defensive	36%	23%	*14%*
Slow to commit	26%	18%	*8%*
Not take criticism	26%	22%	*3%*
Talk about self	21%	15%	*5%*
Previous partners	19%	24%	*-5%*
n=	1027	979	

Table shows % of women and men who rated each characteristic as a 'showstopper'. Alternatives were 'not ideal', 'not bothered', 'not sure'

For most characteristics, women were more likely than men to say they were 'showstoppers'. The biggest red flag for women was a public putdown, rated by 87% of women as a 'showstopper'. This was followed by private putdown at 81%, being flirty 69%, bad manners 57%. Fewer than 8% rate any of these characteristics as 'not bothered' or 'not sure'.

As with green flags, there is then a gap down to being defensive, slow to commit, not willing to take criticism, wanting to talk about self, and a history of previous partnerships, all rated 'showstopper' by between 19% and 36% of women. A significant minority of women are also not bothered, with 41% not worrying about previous partnership history.

For men, the pattern is again similar, with public and private putdowns, being flirty or bad mannered as the top red flags. Just 11-16% of men are not bothered by any of these four. However, like women, 40% of men are not bothered by previous partnership history.

As with green flags, there are differences by age, social class and religion. The most notable are differences with marital groupings. These are shown in the next table.

Red flags	Women			Men		
by marital status	Married	Couple	Single	Married	Couple	Single
Putdown in public	84%	89%	87%	63%	71%	72%
Putdown in private	74%	82%	84%	53%	61%	62%
Flirty	67%	70%	69%	60%	47%	53%
Bad manners	56%	52%	60%	48%	36%	42%
Defensive	33%	30%	43%	23%	15%	26%
Not take criticism	30%	16%	31%	22%	20%	24%
Slow to commit	28%	20%	31%	25%	9%	18%
Previous partners	25%	11%	22%	31%	11%	24%
Talk about self	21%	16%	24%	20%	14%	12%
n=	257	359	405	342	215	417

Table shows % of women and men who rated each characteristic as a 'showstopper'. Alternatives were 'not ideal', 'not bothered', 'not sure'

Among women, those married are more likely to view partnership history and not being able to take criticism as a 'showstopper', with gaps of 14% and 13% respectively. Among men, those married are also more likely to view partnership history as a 'showstopper' with a gap of 20% compared to men in an unmarried relationship. Married men also view slowness to commit, being flirty and bad mannered as more of a 'showstopper' than unmarried men, with gaps of 125 to 15%. The next table shows how women are more likely to view all groups, bar previous partners, as 'showstoppers' independent of age, class, marital status and religion, while married people are especially wary of five of the groups.

Red flag for:	Women	Younger	Older	Richer	Married	Couple	Christian
Putdown in public	✓		✓		✓		
Putdown in private	✓		✓		✓		
Flirty	✓	✓			✓		✓
Bad manners	✓					✓	✓
Defensive	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Slow to commit	✓				✓		✓
Not take criticism	✓					✓	
Talk about self	✓			✓			✓
Previous partners				✓			✓
n=	1027	769	739	277	587	568	764

Table shows those more likely to rate each characteristic as 'showstopper', using series of weighted logistic regressions that included sex, age, social class, marital status and religion. Comparison groups are men, age 24-30, social class A, single, and non-religious.

Summary

In summary, our findings will probably not be terribly surprising to most people. Young adult men and women both want much the same things from their relationships: honesty, kindness, friendship, interest, politeness and empathy. They are generally less bothered by ambition, intelligence, being practical or good looking.

These top few 'green flags' are even more important to women than to men, while the other qualities become more important to both men and women when they marry.

Much the same pattern emerges among qualities to avoid. Young adult men do not want to be put down in public or private. These are the biggest relationship 'red flags'. Nor do they want partners who are flirty or bad mannered. While they are less bothered by other characteristics such as slowness to commit, partnership history, and willingness to take criticism, these characteristics become more important to men and women when they marry.