

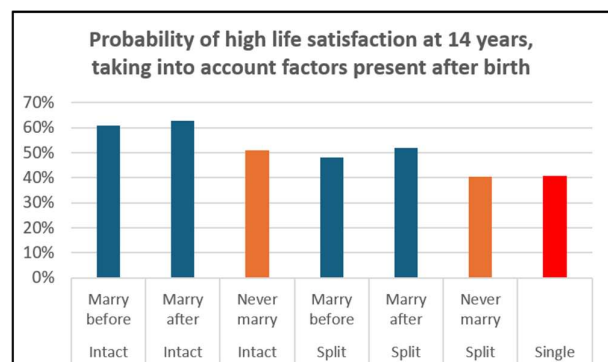
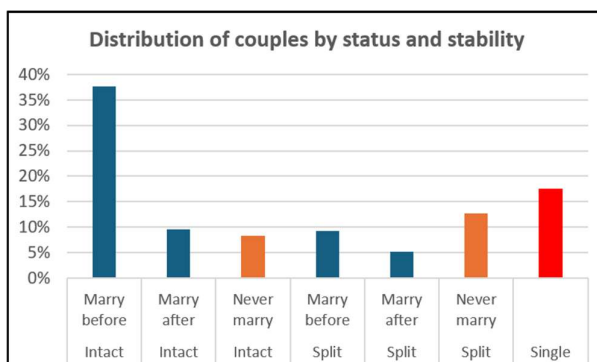


Marriage Foundation

Married mums are the happiest

Dr Harry Benson, October 2026

- Mothers who marry and stay together are the most likely of all groups of parents to report high life satisfaction fourteen years into parenthood. Mothers who marry but divorce are no less likely to be satisfied than any other group.
- Just over half (52%) of the 3,700 mothers in this sample from the Millennium Cohort Study, all of whom had their first child in 2000-02, reported being 'highly satisfied' with their life when their child was aged fourteen, scoring 8 or more out of 10.
- There was, however, substantial variation between groups of mothers. Even after taking account a wide range of background factors measured soon after the birth, including the mother's age, education, ethnicity, income, psychological distress and initial level of life satisfaction, the adjusted probabilities of high life satisfaction were 59% among mothers who married before the birth, 61% among those who married afterwards and 49% among those who stayed together but never married.
- Among mothers whose relationships ended, including those who re-partnered, the probability of high life satisfaction was 45% for those who married before the birth, 57% for those who married afterwards, 42% for those who never married and 45% for those who started out as lone mothers. These probabilities do not differ significantly in statistical terms.
- Marriage was also associated with a substantially greater likelihood that parents stayed together. Once again taking into account a wide range of background factors, including initial levels of life satisfaction, the estimated probability of dissolution was 27% among parents who married before their child was born, 25% among those who married afterwards and 44% among those who never married. In other words, the corresponding probabilities of remaining together were 73%, 75% and 56%.
- In summary, the greatest likelihood of being highly satisfied with life as a mother of a fourteen-year-old was found among those who married and stayed together. The fact that married couples who remained together were more likely to report high life satisfaction than couples of similar background who also remained together but never married suggests that something about marriage itself, or the process of deciding to marry, may contribute to greater satisfaction.



Background

After completing my PhD on the timing of marriage and risk of union dissolution among first-time parents (Benson, 2026), I have often been asked whether I looked at happiness, rather than just relationship stability. After all, it is one thing for couples to stay together and another for them to be happy together.

The reason I looked only at relationship stability in my PhD was the policy question I was seeking to address. We live in a time of historically high levels of family breakdown. Nearly half of all teenagers are not living with both their natural parents (Kiernan et al., 2022). This has substantial consequences for parents, many of whom end up raising children alone and relying on benefits; for taxpayers, who bear much of the resulting welfare cost; and for children, whose educational and wellbeing outcomes tend to be worse when they grow up in lone-parent families than when they grow up with both parents (Booth & Amato, 2001; Brewer & Nandi, 2014; Fitzsimons et al., 2017; Leturcq & Panico, 2019; Maplethorpe, 2010).

My key PhD finding was that parents who marry before, during or after pregnancy face a significantly lower risk of their relationship breaking down than couples who never marry, regardless of their socioeconomic and other background characteristics. I described how several psychological theories provide plausible explanations for why the act of marrying may itself influence couples' attitudes and behaviour in ways that reduce the risk of separation (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019; Rowthorn, 2002; Stanley et al., 2010).

This led me to conclude that policies which encourage more couples to marry could potentially reduce the high levels of family breakdown we currently see.

But what about happiness? Does being married necessarily mean being happy together? Could policies that encourage more couples to marry simply result in more couples remaining in unhappy relationships?

This study addresses that question by looking at mothers' life satisfaction fourteen years after the birth of their first child. It asks not only whether mothers who married are more likely to remain with the father of their child, but also whether marriage is associated with greater life satisfaction

among mothers whose relationships do remain intact.

This second question is important. If marriage were associated with greater happiness only because married couples were more likely to stay together, we would expect mothers who remain together to have similar levels of life satisfaction whether they are married or not. By comparing mothers who have both remained together, this study provides a further test of whether marriage is associated with wellbeing over and above its association with relationship stability.

The findings suggest that it is. Mothers who married and stayed together were substantially more likely to report high life satisfaction than mothers who stayed together but never married. Marriage was also associated with a greater likelihood of the parents remaining together in the first place.

The results therefore provide no evidence that encouraging marriage simply means encouraging more couples to remain unhappily together. Instead, they raise the possibility that marriage is associated both with greater relationship stability and, among couples who remain together, with greater maternal life satisfaction.

Study Design and Method

The study uses data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a nationally representative longitudinal study of children born in the UK in 2000–02. Families were first interviewed when the child was around nine months old and were followed up at several subsequent ages, including when the child was aged fourteen (CLS, 2024).

For this analysis, I identified 3,700 mothers whose first child was the MCS child, who provided information about their relationship status and marriage history, and who responded to the survey when their child was aged fourteen. This makes it possible to examine both what happened to the parents' relationship over the child's first fourteen years and how satisfied mothers were with their lives at the end of that period.

I divided mothers into seven groups according to whether they stayed with the father of their child and whether and when they married:

- Stayed together and married before the child was born

- Stayed together and married after the child was born
- Stayed together but never married
- Split up after marrying before the child was born
- Split up after marrying after the child was born
- Split up without ever marrying
- Started as a lone mother

This classification allows the analysis to distinguish between two questions. First, is marriage associated with whether parents remain together? Second, among mothers whose relationships remain intact, is marriage associated with higher life satisfaction?

The analysis takes account of a wide range of characteristics measured when the child was around nine months old. For almost all mothers, information is available on ethnicity, religion, whether their own parents had stayed together or separated, education, employment status, household income, housing tenure, whether the pregnancy was planned or unexpected, attendance at antenatal classes, smoking during pregnancy, whether the mother had previously lived with one or more other partners, and the mother's age when her child was born.

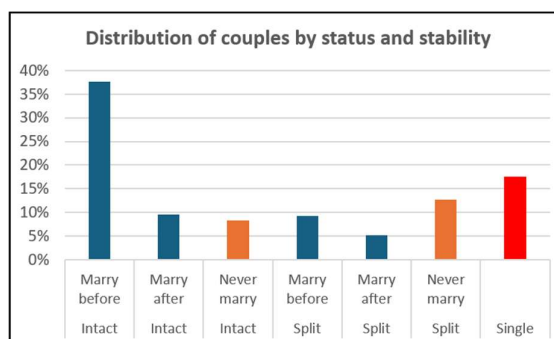
Two measures are particularly important for examining the relationship between marriage and later life satisfaction. The first is whether the mother was experiencing psychological distress when the child was around nine months old. The second is her initial level of life satisfaction, measured on a scale from 1 to 10 and classified as either high (8–10) or not high (1–7). Taking account of initial life satisfaction helps distinguish differences in later satisfaction from differences already present shortly after the child's birth.

The analyses are weighted to make the results representative of the population from which the Millennium Cohort Study was drawn. Multiple imputation is used to deal with missing information, allowing mothers with some missing background data to remain in the analysis rather than being excluded.

The main outcomes are whether the parents remained together until the child was aged fourteen and whether the mother reported high life satisfaction at age fourteen. The analysis first compares the seven groups descriptively and then takes account of differences in their background characteristics.

Results and Analysis

The 3,700 mothers in the analysis followed seven different relationship pathways during the fourteen years after the birth of their first child.

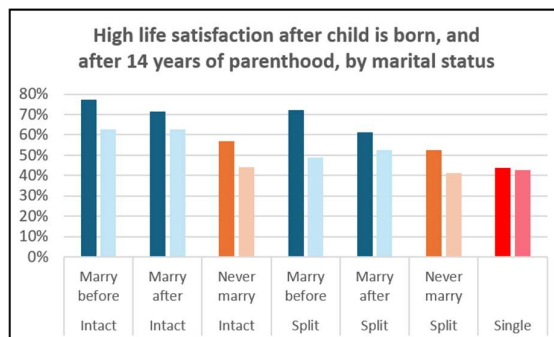


The largest group, comprising 38% of mothers, married before their child was born and remained together. A further 9% married after the birth and remained together, while 8% remained together without ever marrying.

Overall, 55% of mothers were still together with the father of their child when their child reached fourteen. Of these, the great majority had married. The remaining mothers either experienced a relationship breakdown (27%) or had started out as lone mothers (17%).

This provides the basic context for examining the relationship between marriage, stability and later wellbeing.

Mothers were asked about their life satisfaction both when their child was around nine months old (the left-hand darker shaded columns) and again when their child was fourteen (the right-hand lighter shaded columns). At nine months, there were already substantial differences between the groups.



Among mothers who subsequently stayed together, 77% of those who married before the birth and 71% of those who married afterwards were already highly satisfied with their lives at nine months. This compared with 57% of those

who subsequently stayed together without marrying.

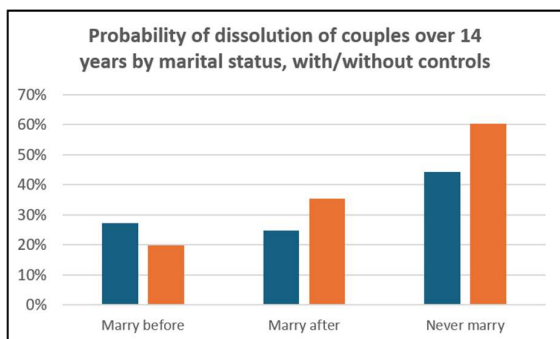
Among mothers whose relationships subsequently broke down, 72% of those who had married before the birth, 61% of those who married afterwards and 53% of those who never married were initially highly satisfied. Among mothers who started out alone, the figure was 44%.

By the time their children were fourteen, however, the proportions reporting high life satisfaction had fallen in every group, with the overall proportion dropping from 65% of all mothers to 53%.

Among mothers who remained together, 63% of those who had married either before or after the birth were highly satisfied at age fourteen, compared with 44% of those who remained together without marrying.

These differences at the start of the study demonstrate why it is important to take account of mothers' initial wellbeing when examining later life satisfaction. A mother who was already highly satisfied at nine months is more likely to be highly satisfied fourteen years later, regardless of her subsequent relationship pathway.

The first main result concerns whether marriage was associated with parents remaining together.



Without taking account of any other characteristics, the probability of relationship dissolution was 20% among couples who married before the birth, 36% among those who married afterwards and 60% among couples who never married (the orange columns).

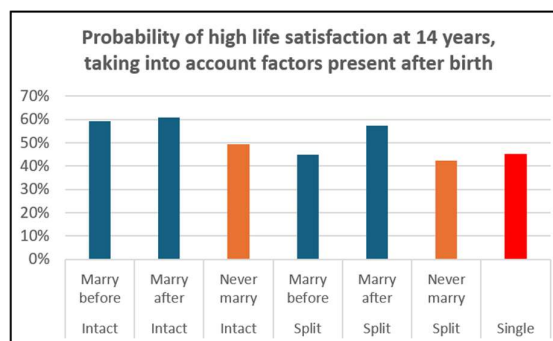
After taking account of the range of characteristics measured soon after the child's birth, the corresponding probabilities narrowed to 27%, 25% and 44% respectively (the blue columns).

Thus, after adjustment, couples who married before or after the birth remained substantially

less likely to experience relationship breakdown compared to couples who never married. The probability of dissolution was approximately 17-20 percentage points lower among couples who married.

This reflects the central finding from my PhD: marriage is associated with greater relationship stability even after taking account of important socioeconomic, family and psychological differences between couples.

The more unexpected finding concerns what happened among mothers whose relationships remained intact.



Before taking account of background characteristics, 63% of mothers who married either before or after the birth and 44% who remained together without marrying were highly satisfied with their lives at age fourteen.

After taking account of characteristics present soon after the child's birth, the corresponding probabilities were adjusted to 59%, 61% and 49%.

The difference between the married and never-married groups therefore remains even after allowing for a wide range of factors that might otherwise account for it. Mothers who remained together without marrying were approximately 10-12 percentage points less likely to report high life satisfaction than mothers who married and remained together.

The regression results in the table below confirm that this difference is statistically significant. Using mothers who married before the birth and remained together as the reference group, those who remained together but never married had a coefficient of -0.42 ($p < .05$).

This finding is important because these are not comparisons between stable married couples and unstable unmarried couples. Both groups remained together for the full fourteen years. Nor can the difference simply be attributed to

differences in initial life satisfaction, since initial satisfaction is included in the analysis.

Among mothers whose relationships had broken down, by contrast, there were no statistically significant differences in later life satisfaction between the different marriage pathways. The clearest association between marriage and later life satisfaction therefore occurs among mothers whose relationships remain intact.

The full regression model provides a broader picture of the factors associated with mothers' life satisfaction at age fourteen. This involves surprisingly few factors, each highlighted in grey in the table due to their statistical significance.

The strongest predictor (in terms of coefficient) was mothers' initial level of life satisfaction. Mothers who were not highly satisfied when their child was nine months old were substantially less likely to report high satisfaction fourteen years later. Psychological distress at the start of the study was also associated with lower later satisfaction.

Relationship history remained important after these and other characteristics were taken into account. Compared with mothers who married before the birth and remained together, mothers who stayed together without marrying were significantly less likely to report high life satisfaction. Mothers whose relationships had broken down were also generally less likely to be highly satisfied.

By contrast, many of the socioeconomic and family-background characteristics included in the model were not independently associated with later high life satisfaction once the other factors were taken into account. This includes education, household income, housing tenure, whether the pregnancy was planned, antenatal class attendance, smoking during pregnancy and previous cohabiting relationships.

The overall picture is therefore relatively clear. Initial wellbeing matters strongly, as do later relationship outcomes. But even after taking these and a wide range of background characteristics into account, marriage remains associated with higher life satisfaction among mothers whose relationships remain intact.

REGRESSION MODEL	Coefficient	Std. err.	P>t	Probability highly satisfied	Approx n=
MARITAL STATUS AND STABILITY					
Intact/Marry before				59%	1398
Intact/Marry after	0.08	0.16	0.634	61%	354
Intact/Never marry	-0.42	0.17	0.014	49%	321
Split/Marry before	-0.60	0.15	0.000	45%	339
Split/Marry after	-0.08	0.22	0.709	57%	194
Split/Never marry	-0.71	0.17	0.000	42%	462
Single	-0.59	0.19	0.002	45%	631
ETHNICITY					
White				52%	3368
Indian	-0.22	0.30	0.464	47%	56
Pakistani/Banglades	0.73	0.32	0.025	68%	87
Black	0.26	0.46	0.575	58%	111
Other	-0.26	0.29	0.381	46%	78
RELIGIOUSNESS					
Religious	-0.03	0.09	0.705	52%	1782
Not religious				53%	1918
GRANDPARENT MARITAL STABILITY					
Parent split 0-9	-0.15	0.13	0.247		664
parent split 10-17	-0.13	0.15	0.395		362
Parent split 18+	-0.15	0.20	0.441		161
EDUCATION					
None/Other	0.01	0.15	0.920	54%	596
GCSE+				53%	2422
Degree	-0.18	0.11	0.102	49%	681
EMPLOYMENT STATUS					
Not in Labour Force	0.14	0.10	0.162		1586
INCOMEQUINTILE					
Lowest	0.00	0.19	0.988	52%	702
2	-0.20	0.16	0.193	48%	725
3				52%	755
4	0.02	0.13	0.905	53%	763
Highest	0.20	0.14	0.151	57%	754
HOUSING TENURE					
Council	-0.02	0.15	0.914		926
Private rent	-0.10	0.14	0.476		663
PLANNED OR SURPRISE PREGNANCY					
Surprise	-0.16	0.11	0.125		1692
ATTENDED ANTE-NATAL OR NOT					
Yes	-0.01	0.11	0.928		2313
SMOKED DURING PREGNANCY OR NOT					
Smoke	0.15	0.13	0.245		638
PREVIOUS COHABITING PARTNERSHIP HISTORY					
One	0.00	0.12	0.987		794
More than one	0.20	0.18	0.286		304
AGE AT CHILD'S BIRTH					
Teens	0.05	0.19	0.788	55%	584
early 20s	0.03	0.14	0.838	54%	817
late 20s				54%	1141
early 30s	-0.12	0.11	0.260	51%	846
35 or over	-0.38	0.16	0.013	45%	311
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS					
Not distressed				54%	3214
Distressed	-0.34	0.16	0.032	46%	486
HIGHLY SATISFIED WHEN CHILD 9 MONTHS OLD					
Less than satisfied	-0.70	0.10	0.000	42%	1293
Satisfied				58%	2407
Constant	1.17	0.19	0.000		

Conclusion and Discussion

These findings point to a consistent pattern. Mothers who married were more likely to remain with the father of their child, and mothers who were married and still together when their child reached fourteen were more likely to report being highly satisfied with life.

The association with relationship stability is substantial. Before taking account of differences

in background characteristics, the estimated probability of relationship dissolution was 20% among couples who married before the birth, compared with 60% among couples who never married. After taking account of characteristics measured soon after the birth, the corresponding probabilities narrowed to 27% and 44% yet remained significantly different.

Marriage was therefore associated with a substantially lower likelihood of the relationship ending, even after allowing for differences in age, education, income, family background, pregnancy circumstances, psychological distress and other characteristics.

The life satisfaction findings add a second and rather different dimension. Among mothers whose relationships remained intact, those who had married reported higher levels of life satisfaction at fourteen than those who had never married. After taking account of the same background characteristics, 59% of mothers who had married before the birth and 61% of those who married afterwards were predicted to report high life satisfaction, compared with 49% of mothers who had remained unmarried. These differences, between married and unmarried mothers still together as couples, were statistically significant.

This comparison is particularly important. It is sometimes argued that married parents appear happier simply because marriage is associated with greater relationship stability. But that cannot fully account for the difference found here. The comparison between mothers who married and remained together and mothers who never married but also remained together is, in effect, a comparison of couples who have both achieved relationship stability. Yet the married mothers were still more likely to report high life satisfaction.

The results therefore raise a more interesting possibility: that something about marriage itself, or about the process of deciding to marry, may be associated with greater wellbeing. Marriage is not simply a label applied to couples who are already doing well. The decision to marry may mark a different level of commitment, clarity or confidence about the relationship, and that may have consequences for how mothers experience family life.

The findings should not, however, be interpreted as proving that marriage causes greater life

satisfaction. This is an observational study, and couples who marry may differ from those who do not in ways that cannot be completely captured by the available measures. The analysis takes account of a wide range of characteristics present soon after the birth, including initial life satisfaction, but unmeasured differences may remain. Nor should the findings be read as suggesting that marriage will improve the wellbeing of every mother or rescue an otherwise unhealthy relationship.

There is nevertheless a striking consistency in the pattern. The strongest predictors of later life satisfaction include how satisfied mothers were soon after the birth, whether they experienced psychological distress, and whether their relationships subsequently remained intact. But even after these and a wide range of socioeconomic and family characteristics are taken into account, the distinction between married and never-married mothers who remain together persists.

This suggests that the role of marriage deserves to be considered more seriously in research on family stability and wellbeing. Rather than treating marriage primarily as an indicator of the characteristics of couples who choose it, researchers should also ask whether the decision and process of marrying may itself change how couples approach their relationship and family life.

For policy, the distinction matters. If marriage is associated not only with greater relationship stability but also with greater wellbeing among couples who remain together, then policies concerned with family breakdown and parental wellbeing should not assume that marriage is merely a proxy for socioeconomic advantage. The findings do not establish that marriage should be promoted as a universal solution. They do suggest, however, that the institution and the process of making a public commitment may have been underestimated as potentially important factors in family life.

The central message is therefore simple. Marriage is associated with a greater likelihood that parents will stay together. But even when couples do stay together, married mothers are more likely to report being highly satisfied with life. That second finding cannot be explained simply by the greater stability associated with marriage. It points towards the possibility that commitment itself may matter.

Data Acknowledgment

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