

Press Release

Marriage does not improve children's development

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, has repeatedly expressed his desire to support marriage through the tax system. Among the possible rationales for such a policy is a belief that having married parents, as opposed to cohabiting parents, improves children's cognitive or social development.

New research published today by researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, finds little or no evidence that marriage itself has any effect on children's social or cognitive development.

Ellen Greaves, Research Economist at the IFS, and one of the authors of the report, said: "It is true that children born to married couples are on average more cognitively and emotionally successful than children born to cohabiting couples. But careful analysis shows that this largely reflects the differences between the types of people who decide to get married and those who don't. *On average* those who marry tend to come from more advantaged families, and are more cognitively and emotionally successful themselves, than those who cohabit. This explains the differences in outcomes for children. Marriage itself appears to confer little, if any, benefit in terms of child development".

Our findings in more detail

Children born to married parents achieve better cognitive and social outcomes, on average, than children born into other family forms, including cohabiting unions. This report asks why this is so: is it the parents' marital status *per se* that results in better outcomes for their children, or is it because married and cohabiting couples are different in some other ways, such as their level of education, which also matter for child development? Differences in outcomes between children whose parents are married and those who cohabit may simply *reflect* these differences in other characteristics rather than be *caused* by marriage.

In this work we have tried to disentangle these effects using two datasets: the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a sample of children born in the UK in the early 2000s; and the British Cohort Study (BCS), a census of individuals born in a particular week in 1970, whose children were surveyed in 2004. The MCS is a nationally representative sample, but only includes information from after the birth of the study child, which may have been affected by parents' marriage decisions. The children of the BCS, on the other hand, are not a nationally representative sample, but do provide very rich information about one of the parents from their *own* childhood, long *before* marriage decisions could have been taken.

Results

We started by looking at the MCS. We found that children born to cohabiting parents, on average, exhibit a small deficit in cognitive development at ages 3, 5 and 7 compared with children born to married parents. However, we show

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that this deficit is almost entirely accounted for by the fact that cohabiting parents tend to have *lower educational qualifications* than married parents, and is not a consequence of parental marital status itself.

We also found that children born to cohabiting parents, on average, exhibit a deficit in socio-emotional development at ages 3, 5 and 7 compared with children born to married parents; this is larger than the cognitive deficit described above. This gap is reduced by around two thirds once differences in parental education and socio-economic status are controlled for, and disappears entirely once other differences, such as family structure, are accounted for. This suggests that the *majority* of the gap in socio-emotional development between children born to cohabiting as opposed to married parents is accounted for by their parents' lower levels of education and income.

Some have argued, though, that this methodology might underestimate the effects of marriage because getting married could itself lead to changes in some of the things we want to control for, like relationship quality, income and education. To test this we repeated our analysis using the BCS data. It does not suffer from the same problem, because we are able to account for differences between married and cohabiting parents which were observed in their *own* childhood, long *before* marriage decisions could have been taken. This method should not lead to any underestimate of the effects of marriage.

When we carried out this analysis we in fact found that it strengthens the conclusions drawn on the basis of our MCS results: that the differences in cognitive and socio-emotional development between children born to married and cohabiting parents mainly or entirely reflect the selection of different types of people into marriage, rather than effects of marriage itself. That is to say, after controlling for differences between couples that were observed in the parent's *own* childhood and early adulthood, *before they entered the relationship into which their child was born*, we find no statistically significant difference between the cognitive and socio-emotional development of children born to parents who choose to marry compared to those who cohabit.

Amongst these factors, parental cognitive ability represents the most important source of selection in our model. We estimate that the higher average cognitive ability of married parents over cohabiting ones explains about one fifth of the gap in cognitive development between those groups of children, and about one seventh of the gap in socio-emotional development, *even after accounting for differences in other observable characteristics*.

Conclusions

We can find no strong evidence that marriage leads to better cognitive or social outcomes for children than cohabitation. Policies aimed at encouraging parents to get married before they bear children thus require a rationale other than one based on the impact of marriage on child development.

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Notes to Editors:

1. The Commentary "Cohabitation, marriage, relationship stability and child outcomes: an update" by Claire Crawford, Alissa Goodman, Ellen Greaves and Robert Joyce is available at: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5632>. If you

have any queries please contact: Bonnie Brimstone at IFS on 020 7291 4800,
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2. This Commentary builds on work published in April 2010 by Alissa Goodman and Ellen Greaves and is available at: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/comm114.pdf>.
3. The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org.