

Press Release

Marriage does not make relationships between parents more stable

Marriage *per se* does not contribute much to making relationships more stable when children are young, according to new research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. This casts doubt on the government's aim of promoting marriage in order to decrease the rate of parental separation.

The IFS analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study shows that while cohabiting parents are more likely to split up than married ones, there is little evidence that marriage *per se* is the cause of greater stability between parents, or that encouraging more people to get married would result in fewer couples splitting up.

Parents who are cohabiting when their child is born are three times more likely to split up by the time their child is five than married parents (27% compared to 9%). However they are also typically younger, less well off, less likely to own their own homes, have fewer educational qualifications and are less likely to plan their pregnancies than married people. **Once these differences between the two groups are accounted for, the difference in the likelihood of separation almost disappears (falling to 2 percentage points).**

The IFS analysis shows that relationship stability is mainly determined not by marriage but by other factors such as age, education, occupation and income, and delaying and planning pregnancy. These factors are also influential in whether people choose to marry or not. So while married couples have more stable relationships than couples who cohabit, this is not because they are married, but because of the other characteristics they have that lead to marriage.

“The evidence suggests that much of the difference in relationship stability between married and cohabiting parents is due to pre-existing differences between the kinds of people who get married before they have children, compared to those that cohabit.” said Ellen Greaves, research economist at the IFS.

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Notes to Editors:

1. The IFS analysis was undertaken by Alissa Goodman and Ellen Greaves. It is published in the briefing paper, *Cohabitation, marriage and relationship stability* (IFS July 2010). The briefing paper builds on analysis published by the IFS in its April 2010 report, *Cohabitation, marriage and child outcomes*. This report concluded that young children's cognitive or social and emotional development does not appear to be significantly affected by the formal marital status of their parents, once differences in other characteristics between married and cohabiting parents are taken into account.

Embargo

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2. Data for the IFS analysis are from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a national longitudinal study of a large sample of children born in 2000 and their parents. The MCS is housed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies www.cls.ioe.ac.uk
3. HM Government's *State of the nation report: poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency in the UK* states: "Around 3 million children in the UK have experienced the separation of their parents. This is partly attributable to a rise in cohabitation, given the increased likelihood of break-up for cohabiting couples relative to married couples" (page 50). The report is available to download from the www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk
4. 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