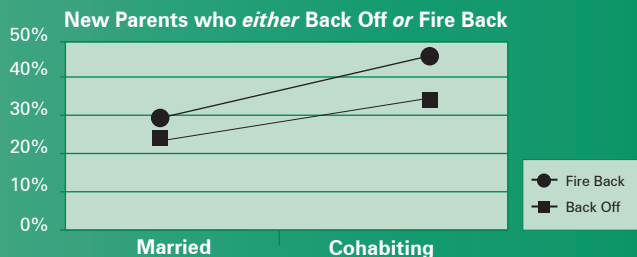


Back off or Fire back?

Negative relationship behaviours amongst postnatal married and cohabiting couples

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The high rate of relationship breakdown amongst cohabiting parents has been the main driver of the steady increase in lone parent family formation in the UK since the mid-1980s. Using original survey data from 236 married and cohabiting new mothers in NHS postnatal clinics in Bristol, this study investigates the prevalence and interaction of four relational bad habits – STOP signs – that have previously been found to predict relationship outcomes. Although few differences were found between married and cohabiting parents in individual use of bad habits, significant differences were found in the interaction of these habits within couples. In particular, cohabiting parents are more likely either to “back off”, where both parents opt out from arguments, or to “fire back”, where fathers put down and mothers think the worst as well as score points or put down in return. Results support the hypothesis that cohabiting fathers are less committed and cohabiting mothers are less secure. Results also demonstrate the utility amongst all new parents – married or cohabiting – of a short relationship education programme that includes STOP signs.



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Introduction

Family breakdown – in the form of divorce or separation resulting in lone parent family formation – is linked to increased risks of negative social outcomes for children that include cognitive, social, behavioural and emotional problems (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994, Amato & Booth, 1997; Marsh & Perry, 2003; Callan et al, 2006). The knock-on effects can last well into adulthood through subsequent socio-economic, psychological, and relational problems (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato, 2005). Family breakdown also increases the risk of living in poverty. In the UK, lone parents face twice the risk of living in poverty compared to married couples (Adams et al, 2008) and many times the risk of receiving income support (Marsh & Perry, 2003). The direct cost to the UK taxpayer of supporting family breakdown has been estimated at £20-24 billion annually (Lindsay et al, 2000; Benson, 2006).

Family breakdown has increased more or less continuously since 1970 (ONS Labour Force Surveys). While rising divorce rates account for this increase throughout the 1970s, divorce rates have been stable since the early 1980s (ONS Population Trends). The continued increase in family breakdown has resulted primarily from the trend away from marriage and the associated dissolution of growing numbers of unmarried families (Callan et al, 2006). Whereas only 12% of children were born to unmarried parents in 1980, the proportion had risen to 43% in 2006 (Population Trends).

Analysis of marital outcomes amongst 15,000 mothers from the Millennium Cohort Study (Benson, 2006) showed that 6% of married parents had split up by their child's third birthday compared with 20% of cohabiting parents and 32% of all unmarried couple parents (combining parents who describe themselves as either "*cohabiting*" or "*closely involved*").

Benson's analysis also found that marital status was the single most important factor in predicting break-up. Demographic factors such as age, income, education, ethnic group and receipt of welfare payments each independently influence the risk of family breakdown amongst new parents. Yet after controlling for these factors, unmarried parents were still more than twice as likely to split up compared to similar married couples.

Analysis of the most recent wave of Millennium Cohort Study data for this paper showed that the risk of breakdown by a child's fifth birthday had risen to 9% for married parents, 26% for cohabiting parents and 35% for all unmarried couples. The risk of family breakdown amongst unmarried couples with children under five years old is thus four times higher than for equivalent married couples.

Researchers have long debated quite whether differential outcomes between married and unmarried couples are due to selection or experience. Do couples who do better select into marriage in the first place? Or is it the experience of marriage itself that helps couples do better? Selection factors such as ethnic group and education (Manning & Brown, 2006), parental relationship history (Amato & DeBoer, 2001) and father involvement (Carlson, 2006) help explain some of the differences in family and relationship outcomes. However the experience of cohabitation and/or marriage also appears to have additional effects on individual well-being (Lamb et al, 2003), relationship satisfaction (Kamp Dush et al, 2003) and stability (Marsh & Perry, 2003) that are not explained fully by selection factors. Given the implausibility of a randomised controlled trial where couples are allocated to either marriage or cohabitation, it may be that the selection vs. experience question can never be fully resolved.

Prediction research on relationship processes suggests that both positive and negative dynamic factors independently influence relationship outcomes, with the negatives holding the stronger influence in the earlier years and positives in the later years (Gottman et al, 1998). Negative dynamic factors that predict relationship outcomes include communication withdrawal and invalida-

tion (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993), escalation, defensiveness and withdrawal (Gottman et al, 1998), negative interpretation (Baucom & Epstein, 1990) and the well-known wife-demand-husband-withdraw pattern (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Cohabiting couples – or even couples who cohabit and subsequently marry – appear to exhibit greater deficits in these dynamic factors, whether acquired by selection or experience. For example, men who cohabit before they get engaged have persistently lower levels of commitment once they do marry (Stanley et al, 2006). Couples who cohabit and then marry also demonstrate more negative and less positive problem solving and support behaviours compared with spouses who did not cohabit (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).

The growing social costs resulting from high break-up rates amongst cohabiting parents with young children have attracted the attention of policymakers in the US and UK. Relationship education is one such promising intervention already established in the US (Dion, 2006) and mooted in the UK (Callan et al, 2007). Relationship education programmes, such as PREP (Markman et al, 2001), teach couples about dynamic factors that are both open to change and will help couples improve their relationship quality and stability (Stanley, 2001). Relationship education programmes lasting just a few hours have been shown to strengthen family relationships over a period of one to five years (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Compared to the US, relationship education programmes and research in the UK are both in their infancy. “Let’s Stick Together” is a new one hour preventive relationship education session being offered to antenatal and postnatal couples in the Bristol area via health visitors and clinics. The programme discusses three main factors – relational bad habits, good habits and father involvement – that have been shown to predict relationship outcomes. No great claims are made for the efficacy of such a short programme. However over 95% of parents report that they found the session “useful”, “enjoyable”, “informative”, “not embarrassing”, “not boring” and “not scary” (www.bcft.co.uk). Typical comments after the session include “a real eye-opener” and “the most useful session of our postnatal course!”

The bad habits highlighted in “Let’s Stick Together” are known as “STOP signs” (Benson 2005). A variation of PREP’s “danger signs” (Markman et al 2001) and Gottman’s “four horsemen” (Gottman 1994), STOP signs are designed to help individuals and couples identify and reduce their own negative dynamic factors. STOP is an acronym for:

- S** **Scoring points** is a defensive or competitive response that follows a perceived accusation or criticism. A typical example may begin with an observation or complaint, such as “*You left your trousers on the floor again.*” To *score points* is to respond by changing the subject or blaming the other person, “*Well, you didn’t clear up after dinner last night, again.*”
- T** **Thinking the worst** is a habitual tendency to apply a negative interpretation in response to events, most likely due to cumulative past experience at home, in school or in a previous relationship. Examples include “*He’s only doing it because he wants something from me,*” “*She did that on purpose just to wind me up,*” “*That means our relationship is in trouble,*” or “*Maybe I’m in trouble.*”
- O** **Opting out** is a response where one or both partners withdraw from an argument, perhaps by announcing unilaterally “*I’m not talking about this any more,*” or by blanking one another emotionally through closed body language, or by physically walking away and leaving the scene altogether.
- P** **Putting down** is the communication of a dismissive, disrespectful or contemptuous attitude whether verbally through rudeness and character assassination (“*You’re an idiot*”), or non-verbally through rolling the eyes and clicking the tongue.

This study investigates the prevalence and interaction of STOP signs as a potential mechanism through which married and cohabiting new parents may have differential relationship outcomes. Although the study design precludes clear conclusions about cause and effect, any differences in behaviour found – after controlling for demographic factors – may encourage further research as well as validate the utility of discussing the STOP signs with all new parents.

The first hypothesis to be tested is whether cohabiting parents report greater prevalence, compared to married parents, of any or all of the four STOP signs. This finding would lend support to the selection hypothesis. Higher individual levels of STOP signs might suggest that cohabiting parents in general may be predisposed towards negative relationship behaviour. In this way, couples at higher risk of dissolution may be selecting into cohabitation in the first place.

The second hypothesis to be tested is whether cohabiting couples report combinations of STOP signs consistent with the theory that cohabiting fathers are less committed and cohabiting mothers are more insecure. Greater prevalence of complex patterns of bad habits amongst cohabiting couples would be more supportive of the experience hypothesis. It would also suggest that Stanley et al's (2006) "*sliding vs. deciding*" hypothesis about lower commitment amongst cohabiting men who marry may also extend to cohabiting men who become parents. Under this hypothesis, it is predicted that the patterns of STOP signs within cohabiting couples would reflect fathers who have less to lose if the relationship goes wrong and mothers who avoid or minimise situations that might result in their partner's threat to leave.

Design

The "Let's Stick Together" (formerly "ADAPT") relationship education session was presented by a trainer from the charity Bristol Community Family Trust on 31 occasions at 19 NHS health clinics in the Bristol area. 254 parents with babies under one year old attended a single session each. The 40-50 minute session covers three topics – good habits, bad habits, and father involvement – each of which derived from research on dynamic factors that predict relationship outcomes.

This study concerns only bad habits or negative behaviours, operationalised as STOP signs. The trainer explained the concept of STOP signs and described how he/she had identified and reduced his/her own bad habits. At the end of the session, parents were invited to give feedback of their own experience of STOP signs, after which a self-report questionnaire was handed out.

The questionnaire asked parents to report how helpful they found the STOP signs concepts, how often they and their spouse/partner each use STOP sign individually, and how likely it is that the STOP signs idea will change their behaviour. Each question included four possible responses of "*not at all*", "*slightly*", "*fairly*" and "*very*". Missing data, comprising 5.5% of all responses, was entered as a response of "*not at all*".

For the main analysis, responses were scored with dummy variables where "*not at all*" and "*slightly*" score 0 and "*fairly*" and "*very*" score 1. A secondary analysis was also conducted for more frequent use of STOP signs where only "*very*" responses score 1.

Parents were also asked to report their marital status, age, approximate household income and education. Data from 8 fathers as well as 10 mothers who reported their marital status as "single/other" were excluded from this study. Of the remaining 236 mothers, 163 (69%) were married and 73 (31%) cohabiting. There were no significant differences between married and cohabiting mothers in terms of age or education, but there was a significant difference in terms

of income. Cohabiting mothers were more likely to report their household income in the lowest of four income brackets (18% vs. 4%).

The sample of mothers is skewed towards those with both higher education and income. 60% of married mothers and 48% of cohabiting mothers have degrees. 50% of married mothers and 47% of cohabiting mothers report household income above £40,000 p.a. However the sample is representative of national perinatal course attendance. The 69:31 ratio of married and unmarried mothers attending Bristol postnatal groups in this study is similar to the 66:34 ratio of mothers attending antenatal groups nationally in the much larger Millennium Cohort Study (Benson 2006).

Finally, as part of a wider investigation, this study also compared the accuracy of mother assessment of spouse/partner STOP signs compared to actual spouse/partner self-report in two small samples. Amongst 13 couples attending antenatal or postnatal classes, correlations between assessments and actual levels of each STOP sign were all highly significant, ranging from $r=.80$ to $r=.98$. The average assessment was very accurate, ranging from 92% to 97%. Similar results were found amongst 56 engaged couples attending a one day relationship education course that included STOP signs. Correlations were again highly significant, ranging from $r=.55$ to $r=.69$, and average accuracy ranged from 76% to 82%.

Results

Men and women – especially married men and women – differ significantly in their overall use of individual STOP signs.

	"Fairly" or "Very"				"Very" only		
	Fathers	Mothers	P	Fathers	Mothers	P	
Married only							
S	45%	63%	***	23%	31%	ns	
T	34%	45%	*	15%	21%	ns	
O	56%	42%	**	27%	20%	ns	
P	28%	45%	***	9%	18%	**	
Cohabiting only							
S	48%	60%	ns	26%	30%	ns	
T	30%	52%	***	7%	21%	**	
O	62%	48%	*	41%	29%	ns	
P	33%	36%	ns	10%	14%	ns	

Amongst parents overall, there were clear tendencies between genders (see Table 1). In general, mothers are more likely to *score points*, *think the worst*, and *put down* whereas fathers are more likely to *opt out*. Similar gender differences were found where use of STOP signs occurs "very often".

For both married and cohabiting parents, the relative sizes of these gender gaps are similar: mothers in general are more likely to *score points* and fathers in general are more likely to *opt out*. However for married parents, fathers are relatively more likely to *put down*. For cohabiting parents, fathers are relatively more likely to *think the worst*.

It is possible that some of the apparently large differences in the cohabiting sample were rendered marginally or non-significant due to the smaller sample size.

Married and cohabiting parents do not differ in their overall use of STOP signs – with one exception.

Table 2- STOP signs by marital status

p<.10*, p<.05**
Fisher test

	"Fairly" or "Very"				"Very" only		
	Married	Cohabiting	P	Married	Cohabiting	P	
Fathers only							
S	45%	48%	ns	23%	26%	ns	
T	34%	30%	ns	15%	7%	ns	
O	56%	62%	ns	27%	41%	**	
P	28%	33%	ns	9%	10%	ns	
Mothers only							
S	63%	60%	ns	31%	30%	ns	
T	45%	52%	ns	21%	21%	ns	
O	42%	48%	ns	20%	29%	ns	
P	45%	36%	ns	18%	14%	ns	

There were no significant differences in use of any of the STOP signs between either married and cohabiting mothers or married and cohabiting fathers. Where STOP signs are used "very often", there were no differences between groups, with the one exception where cohabiting fathers are more likely to *opt out* "very often" compared to their married counterparts (41% vs. 27%).

There are both similarities and differences in the way married and cohabiting couples use paired combinations of STOP signs.

There are significant positive correlations for married and cohabiting couples where both parents *score points* and where both parents use *put downs*. For example, use of put downs by both parents correlates highly significantly ($r=.39$) for cohabiting couples and significantly ($r=.22$) for married couples. However there are also differences where combinations of STOP signs correlate for married parents but not cohabiting parents, and vice versa. For example, use of *thinking the worst* by both parents shows a significant correlation ($r=.27$) for cohabiting parents but not for married parents ($r=.15$).

Married and cohabiting couples do not differ in their use of demand-withdraw.

We specifically investigated the demand-withdraw phenomenon, where one spouse or partner either *scores points* or *puts down* and the other spouse or partner *opts out*. There were no differences found between married and cohabiting couples in occurrences of conventional female-demand male-withdraw format (44% vs. 47%), reverse format (30% vs. 32%) or either format (61% vs. 63%). However where demand-withdraw was used "very often", there was evidence that cohabiting couples are more likely than married couples to use the reverse format (18% vs. 10%). Logistic regression analysis of this latter finding showed that both cohabitation and age under 30 were both of unique borderline significance ($p=.08$ and $p=.06$ respectively) after controlling for education and for each other.

Patterns of STOP signs within couples differ by age, marital status and education

In investigating the interaction of STOP signs within both married couples and cohabiting couples, logistic regression analyses were conducted on 45 separate combinations or patterns of STOP signs. The initial regression model – comprising marital status, age, income, and education – was narrowed from 10 to five variables. Age was compressed into two variables (under or over 30 years old) and income variables were removed altogether as these had no unique influence on any of the analyses. In 25 of these subsequent logistic regression analyses, age was either a uniquely significant ($p < .05$) or borderline significant ($p < .10$) factor. Lower education was uniquely significant in only two analyses. Cohabitation was uniquely significant in nine analyses.

Cohabiting couples are significantly more likely to back off or fire back

Table 3- STOP “Back Off” or “Fire Back” by marital status $p < .10^*$, $p < .05^{**}$
Fisher test

	“Fairly” or “Very”			“Very” only		
	Married	Cohabiting	p	Married	Cohabiting	P
“Back off”	25%	33%	ns	23%	26%	*
“Fire Back”	5%	14%	**	15%	7%	ns
Either...Or...	29%	47%	**	27%	41%	*

Amongst the 45 different interactions of STOP signs within couples that we analysed, a combination of two complex interactions most clearly distinguished between married and cohabiting parents.

Cohabiting couples *back off* – where both parents *opt out* – more often than married couples (33% vs. 25%). Although this difference is non-significant, it approaches significance where couples *back off “very often”* (15% vs. 8%).

Cohabiting couples are significantly more likely to *fire back* – where neither parent *opts out* but where the father *puts down* and the mother both *thinks the worst* and also either *scores points* or *puts down* – compared to married couples (14% vs. 5%). This pattern occurs in one direction only. There is no significant difference between cohabiting and married couples when the gender roles in the *fire back* pattern are reversed (7% vs. 11%).

Combining these two patterns together, cohabiting couples are significantly more likely either to *back off* or to *fire back* compared to married couples (47% vs. 29%). Cohabiting couples are also more likely to use either of these patterns “very often” although the difference is only borderline significant (16% vs. 8%).

In order to establish whether this finding is influenced more by marital status or by demographics, logistic regressions were conducted. Where these patterns occurred either “fairly” or “very often”, the only significant factor was marital status. After controlling for age and education, cohabiting parents had twice the odds for either *backing off* or *firing back* compared to married parents ($p < .05$). Findings were similar where patterns are reported “very often”. However in this extreme case, the unique influence of cohabitation is only of borderline significance ($p = .10$). This may simply reflect the low numbers in this sample – 13 married couples and 12 cohabiting couples – who report using either of these patterns “very often”.

Almost all mothers find STOP signs helpful, whether married or cohabiting.

More than 95% of both married and cohabiting mothers find STOP either “fairly helpful” or “very helpful”. More than half of all new mothers find it “very helpful”. More than two thirds of all new mothers say they are “fairly” or “very likely” to change their behaviour as a result. One quarter of all new mothers say they are “very likely” to change. In each of these categories, there were no differences between married and cohabiting mothers.

Discussion

The aim of this study has been to identify relational bad habits that might help explain why cohabiting unmarried couples with young children are so much more likely to split up than comparable married couples. Whether these differences are the result of selection or causal effects of being married or unmarried can then be addressed more fully by future research.

The survey is one of the first to explore the characteristics of mothers who attend NHS postnatal clinics in the UK. Amongst many interesting findings, the study found that the typical postnatal group mother tends to be in her 30s, well-educated, and of above-average income. Demographically, the two thirds of mothers who are married are also broadly similar to the one third of mothers who are unmarried in terms of age and education. Although the two groups differ statistically by income, none of the many regression analyses we conducted highlight any unique influence of income on negative behaviours. Therefore as a comparison of married and cohabiting parents, the study is not compromised by differential background factors.

The findings in this study are more consistent with the experience hypothesis than with the selection hypothesis. Cohabiting parents report significantly higher levels of complex patterns of bad habits within couples compared to married parents. However there are almost no differences in individual levels of overall bad habits between cohabiting and married parents.

The survey asked mothers in postnatal clinics to report their own and their husband’s or partner’s prevalence of STOP signs – *scoring points*, *thinking the worst*, *opting out*, *putting down*. These four relational bad habits reflect known factors, each of which individually predict couple outcomes over time (Gottman, 1994; Markman et al, 2001).

Under the selection hypothesis, it was predicted that cohabiting parents would report higher individual levels of any or all of the STOP signs compared to married parents. This was found not to be the case. Almost all of the differences in overall levels of each STOP sign are found between fathers and mothers rather than between the married and the cohabiting. Amongst married couples for example, mothers are more likely than fathers to *score points* and *put down* whereas fathers are more likely than mothers to *opt out*. Amongst cohabiting couples, mothers are more likely than fathers to *think the worst*. Yet when comparing married and cohabiting parents, there are almost no significant differences in any of the STOP signs either between married and cohabiting fathers or between married and cohabiting mothers.

Only one finding runs counter to this general observation that differences in individual bad habits are between genders rather than marital status. In extreme cases, cohabiting fathers only are more likely to *opt out* “very often” compared to their married counterparts.

If the greater risk of separation were due to a higher initial level of bad habits amongst cohabiting couples, we would expect to see this predisposition reflected in a higher level of STOP signs between married and cohabiting couples. The lack of difference in overall level of bad habits amongst either fathers or mothers tends to argue against a pure selection effect.

Under the experience hypothesis, it was predicted that cohabiting parents would report combinations of STOP signs consistent with the theory that cohabiting fathers are less commit-

ted and cohabiting mothers are more insecure. This was found to be the case.

The key finding of this study is that cohabiting parents are more likely than married parents to use one of two complex patterns of behaviour during arguments. Cohabiting parents are more likely than married parents to *back off*, where both parents tend to withdraw from conflict and *opt out*. Amongst those who do not *back off* in this way, cohabiting parents are also more likely than married parents to *fire back* during arguments, whereby fathers who *put down* their spouse or partner live with mothers who *think the worst* and also either *score points* or *put down* in return. The sheer complexity of the differences found between cohabiting and married couples suggests that the nature of marriage and cohabitation somehow influences how couples interact.

If the greater risk of separation amongst cohabiting couples is indeed due to a fundamental difference in the experience of the relationship, we would expect to see higher levels of destructive patterns within cohabiting couples. For this explanation to hold, the big gap in outcomes between cohabiting and married couples would seem to require a similarly big gap in behavioural differences. Whereas one half of all cohabiting parents apply one of these complex patterns of behaviour during arguments, less than one third of married parents do so. This big differential holds regardless of age, income and education.

Stanley et al (2006) hypothesise that the decisions about entry into cohabitation or marriage are especially important for men's commitment. Men, but not women, report persistently higher levels of commitment during the early years of marriage if they *decide* to get married before living together rather than *slide* into living together before getting married. Men's commitment is therefore dependent upon their decision about their future as a couple.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its known association with relationship difficulties, married and cohabiting couples are similarly likely to use the demand-withdraw combination. This pattern occurs amongst two thirds of all couples, regardless of marital status, and is more common in the conventional female-demand male-withdraw format than the reverse. This study found one exception to the general observation that demand-withdraw is a gender-driven phenomenon. In extreme cases only, cohabiting couples are more likely than married couples to use the reverse male-demand female-withdraw pattern "*very often*". Use of this pattern is influenced by age as well as marital status.

One possible explanation for the higher break-up rates of cohabiting couples is therefore lower levels of commitment by cohabiting men together with consequent higher levels of insecurity amongst cohabiting women. Although the survey used for this study did not include measures of commitment or insecurity, the behavioural findings are congruent with such a hypothesis and can be tested in future research.

Understanding the findings of a cross-sectional survey in terms of the potential causal influence of commitment is therefore somewhat speculative at present. Nevertheless, the broad findings make sense of such a context.

Lower commitment amongst cohabiting fathers, and consequently greater insecurity amongst cohabiting mothers, does not necessarily imply or require more negative attitudes that are then reflected in higher overall levels of STOP signs. However it does suggest an increased likelihood of complex interactive combinations of negative responses.

The characteristics of a less committed parent might include a greater willingness to *put down* in response to threat, because there is less to lose by behaving dismissively or contemptuously. More committed or secure parents would be more restrained. Less committed parents might also be more tempted to *opt out* of conflict but less inclined to *think the worst*, in both cases because there is less to lose.

In contrast, the characteristics of a less secure parent might be to respond defensively to conflict by *opting out* rather than by pursuing an injustice, in the manner of the classic demand-withdraw pattern. When threatened, a less secure parent might both fear for the future of their relationship and fire back as a purely defensive response.

From these descriptions, it is possible to make sense of the main findings in this study. Cohabiting parents are more likely to respond to conflict with their partner either by *backing off* or by *firing back*.

Cohabiting parents may have good reason to *back off* from conflict and each other. Lack of commitment may reduce the incentive to invest the time, care and energy needed to resolve arguments. Lack of security may increase the risk that further argument may escalate so that the less committed partner may leave altogether. The study shows that cohabiting mothers and fathers are more likely to *opt out* from conflict "*very often*", both individually and together, compared to their married counterparts.

Other cohabiting parents also have good reason to *fire back* at one another in response to conflict. Lack of commitment may reduce the inhibition to treat spouses or partners with care and courtesy in the face of conflict and provocation. Lack of security may increase fears about the future prospects of the relationship but also increase the likelihood of responding defensively to aggression. The study shows that cohabiting fathers who *put their partners down* live with cohabiting mothers who *think the worst* and either *score points* or *put down "often"*.

The main strength of this exploratory study is that it provides a good base for further research into the link between commitment, security, relational habits and couple outcomes amongst cohabiting and married parents. The main finding, that cohabiting and married parents differ consistently in certain complex patterns of negative relationship behaviour postnatally, is new, interesting, and robust. There are also considerable strengths in the sample used. Although there is little evidence that acceptance or declining of relationship education courses is a confounding factor (Stanley et al, 1995), self-selection remains a potential limitation of almost all studies of relationship education.

The sample in this study is highly unusual in that the participants are self-selecting into a *postnatal* course rather than a relationship education course. This eliminates the possibility of self-selection into relationship education specifically. New evidence suggests it is also unlikely that self-selection into *antenatal* or *postnatal* education generally is a major factor. A separate exploratory analysis of UK Millennium Cohort Study data conducted for this study showed that marital status is a far more important predictor of relationship stability than *antenatal* course attendance. Amongst attenders, 23% of cohabiting mothers and 7% of married mothers split up during their subsequent first five years of parenthood. Amongst non-attenders, 26% of cohabiting mothers and 10% of married mothers split up. The gap in relationship stability between cohabiting and married mothers is more than four times that between attenders and non-attenders.

The sample also benefits from the homogeneity of demographics between married and cohabiting parents. However this means we should give even more weight to the findings in this study because our sample is biased against finding big relational differences. Compared to the national sample of mothers in the Millennium Cohort Study (Benson, 2006), cohabiting mothers in this local sample are significantly more advantaged and less disadvantaged. For example, amongst cohabiting mothers reporting household income above £40,000, 47% of our local sample compares with 9% in the national sample. Conversely, amongst cohabiting mothers reporting household income below £20,000, 18% of our local sample compares with

56% in the national sample. Given the more stable outcomes associated with higher income, the lack of demographic difference in our local sample suggests the findings may be even more magnified in a more representative sample.

There are limitations. Most importantly, the finding remains speculative. Even if the hypothesis is supported by the findings that cohabiting parents are more likely to *back off* or *fire back*, longitudinal studies are required to be more confident that these particular complex patterns of negative patterns are especially predictive of subsequent separation. Previous research suggests that demographic factors do not consistently predict the higher separation risk amongst cohabiting couples (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Although the regression analyses in this study did not find any unique influence of income and education on negative behaviours, it is possible that such differences exist amongst those not attending postnatal courses. Mothers who attend postnatal courses also tend to be better educated and of above-average income.

Other research, mainly in the US, shows that religiosity and religious dissimilarity (Curtis & Ellison, 2002), length of time living together (Teachman & Polonko, 1990) and plans to marry (Skinner et al, 2002) all influence relationship outcomes. Future research would undoubtedly benefit from information on these factors, whether to discount or affirm their influence amongst UK couples. For example, further analysis of UK Millennium Cohort Study data for this author shows that religious dissimilarity is associated with an increased risk of separation amongst parents with three year old children. Future research would also benefit from data provided by both parents, although our preliminary analyses of smaller samples of new parent couples and engaged couples show that women's assessments of STOP signs correlate highly with men's actual self-reports.

Finally, regardless of whether relational bad habits are acquired by selection or experience, the study highlights the relevance and potential benefit of covering these principles in any relationship education programme aimed at new parents. Almost all parents, married and cohabiting, find it helpful to hear about STOP signs. Over half of married mothers and two thirds of cohabiting mothers find it "very" helpful. Best of all, amongst the parents who either *back off* or *fire back*, nearly three quarters of all mothers report that they are likely to change their behaviour as a result of hearing about STOP signs.

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