

Back off or fire back?

Bad habits amongst married
and unmarried new parents

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Bristol Community Family Trust

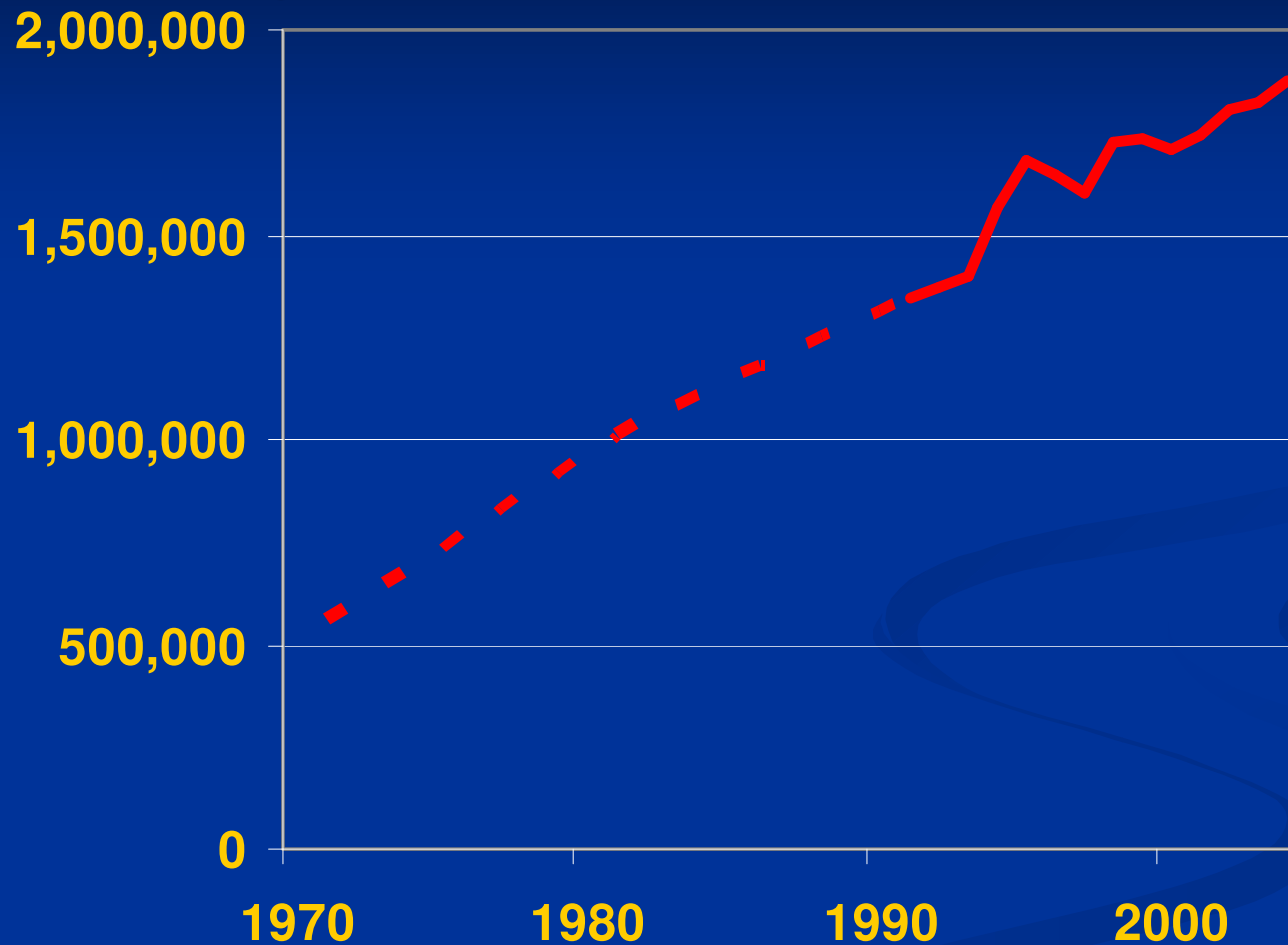
Summary

- Are post-natal cohabiting parents more unstable because fathers are less committed and mothers are less secure?
- This study identifies complex negative behaviours that support this hypothesis
- The findings also affirm the benefits for all new parents – married or cohabiting – of a short relationship education programme that includes “STOP signs”

Family breakdown and ...

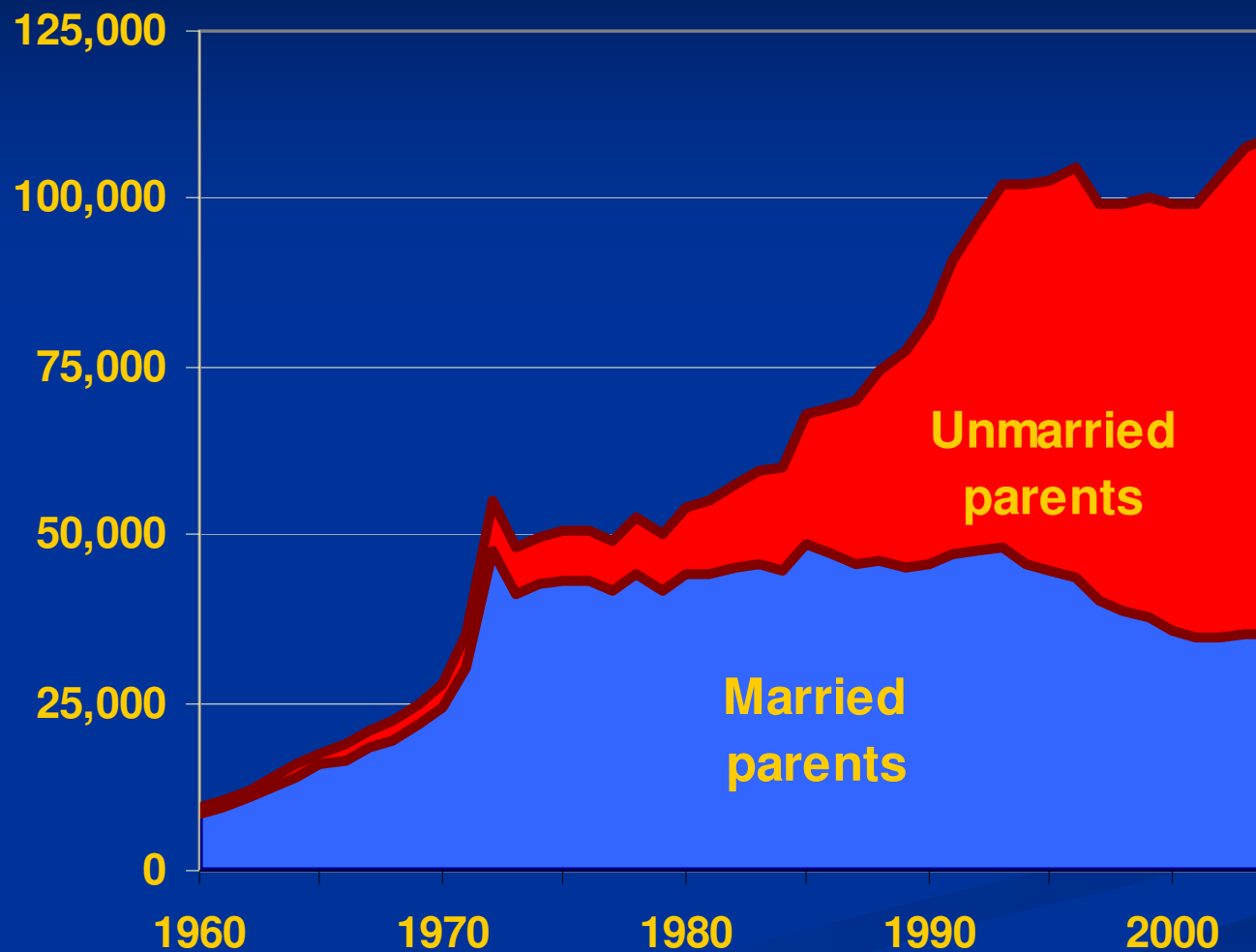
- Crime
- Truancy
- Domestic violence
- Poverty
- Ill-health
- Mental health
- Child abuse
- Educational problems
- Emotional problems
- Relationship problems
- Substance abuse

Rising lone parent families

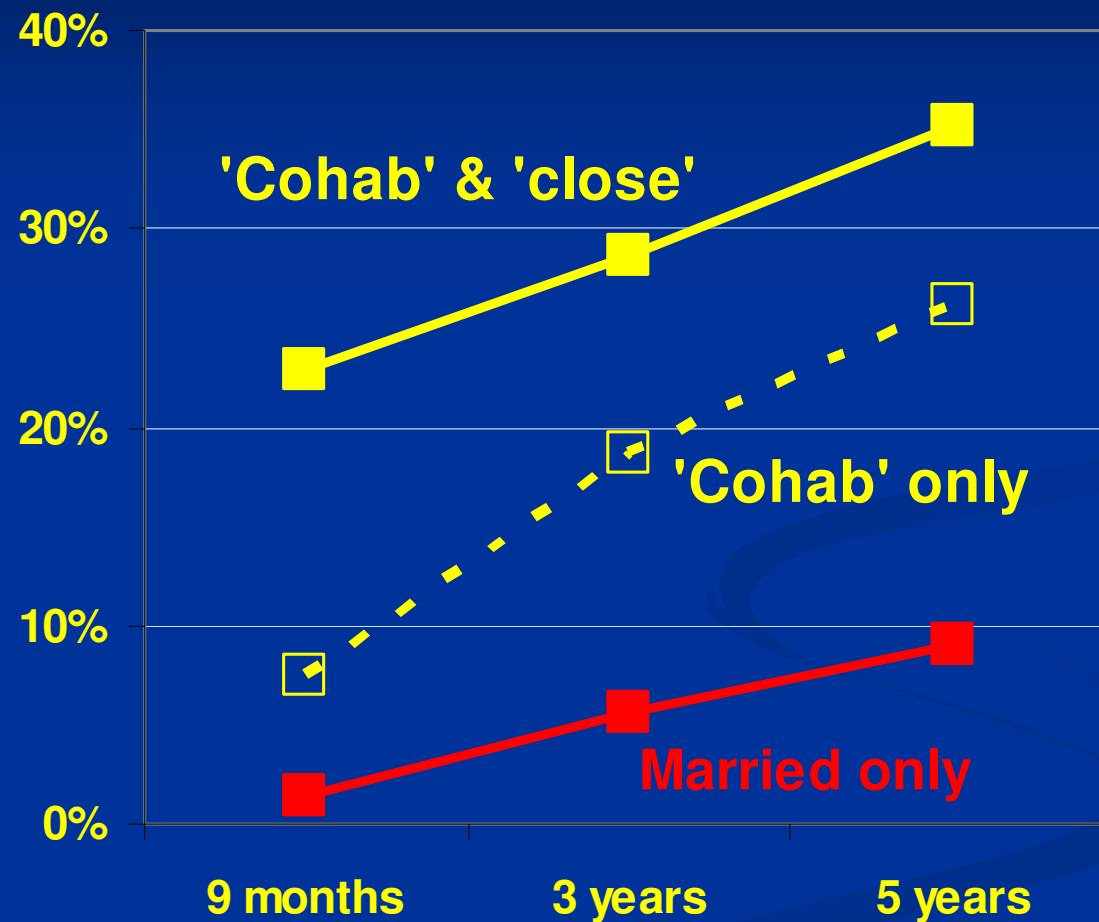


Source: ONS

Cohabitation is the driver

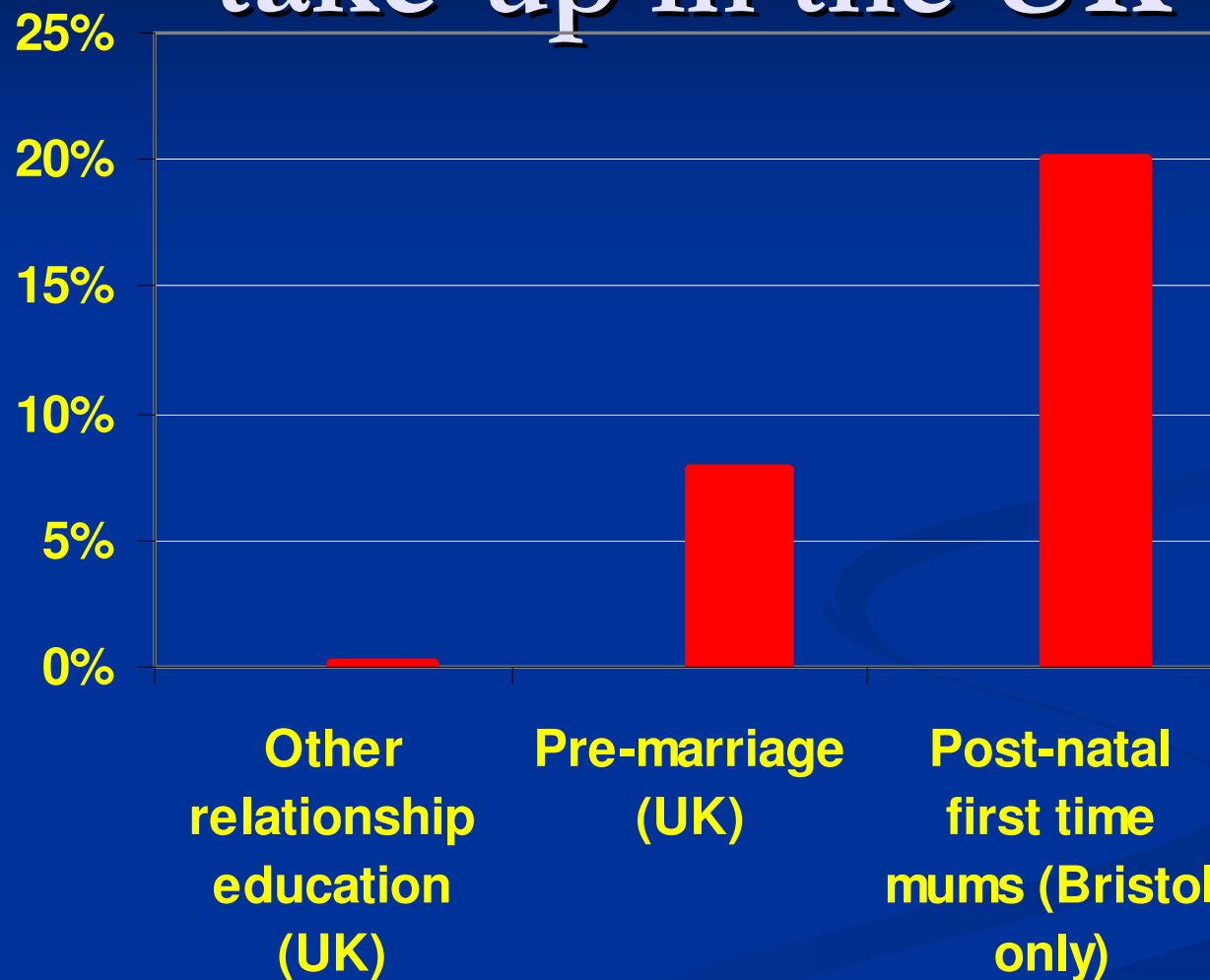


Break-up risk & new parents



(Source: Millennium Cohort Study - Benson 2006 & unpublished)

Estimate of relationship education take-up in the UK



Why do cohabitees split?

- Commitment/security
“slide/decide” research
- Negative predictors
STOP signs

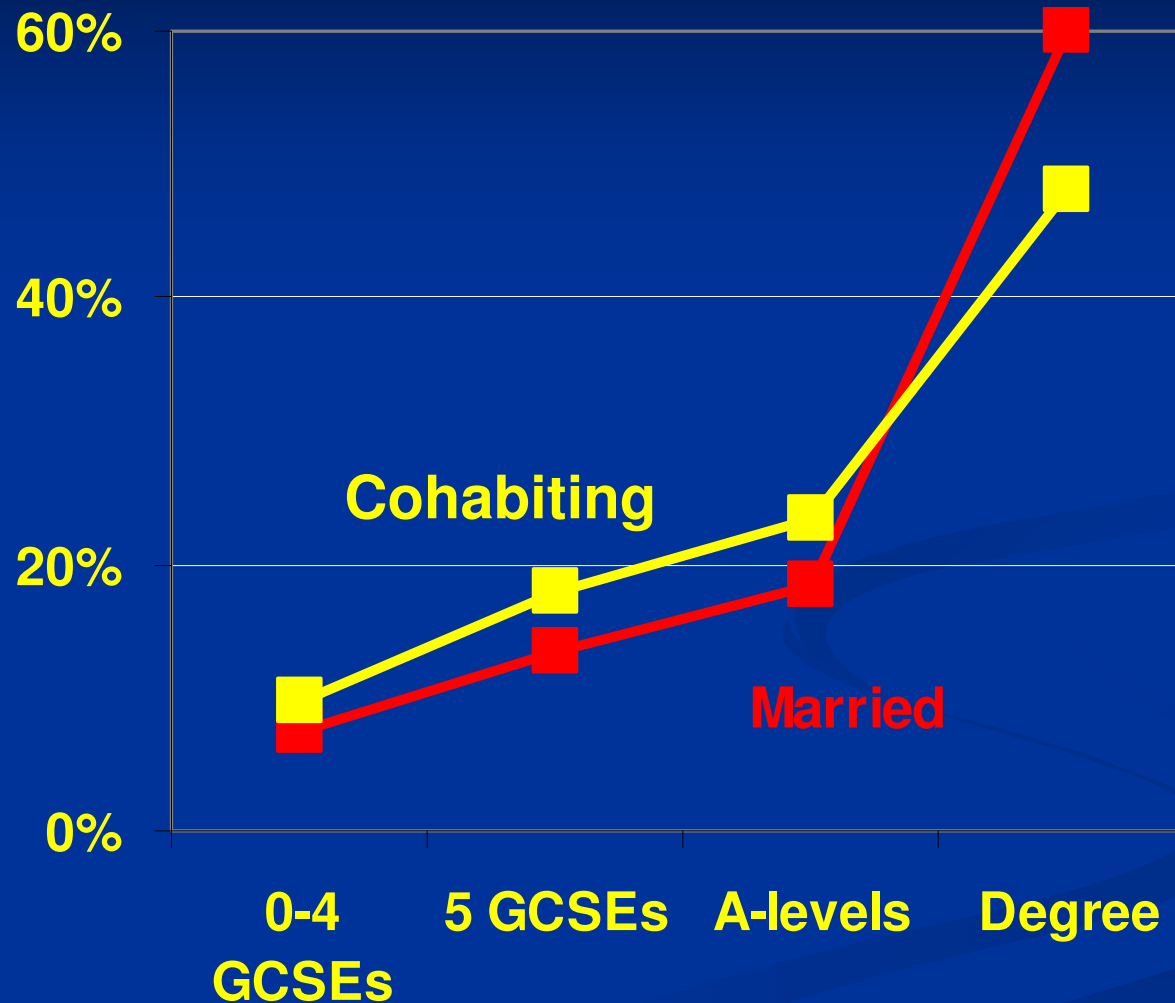
Negative predictors of FB

- S – Score Points
- T – Think the worst
- O – Opt out
- P – Put down

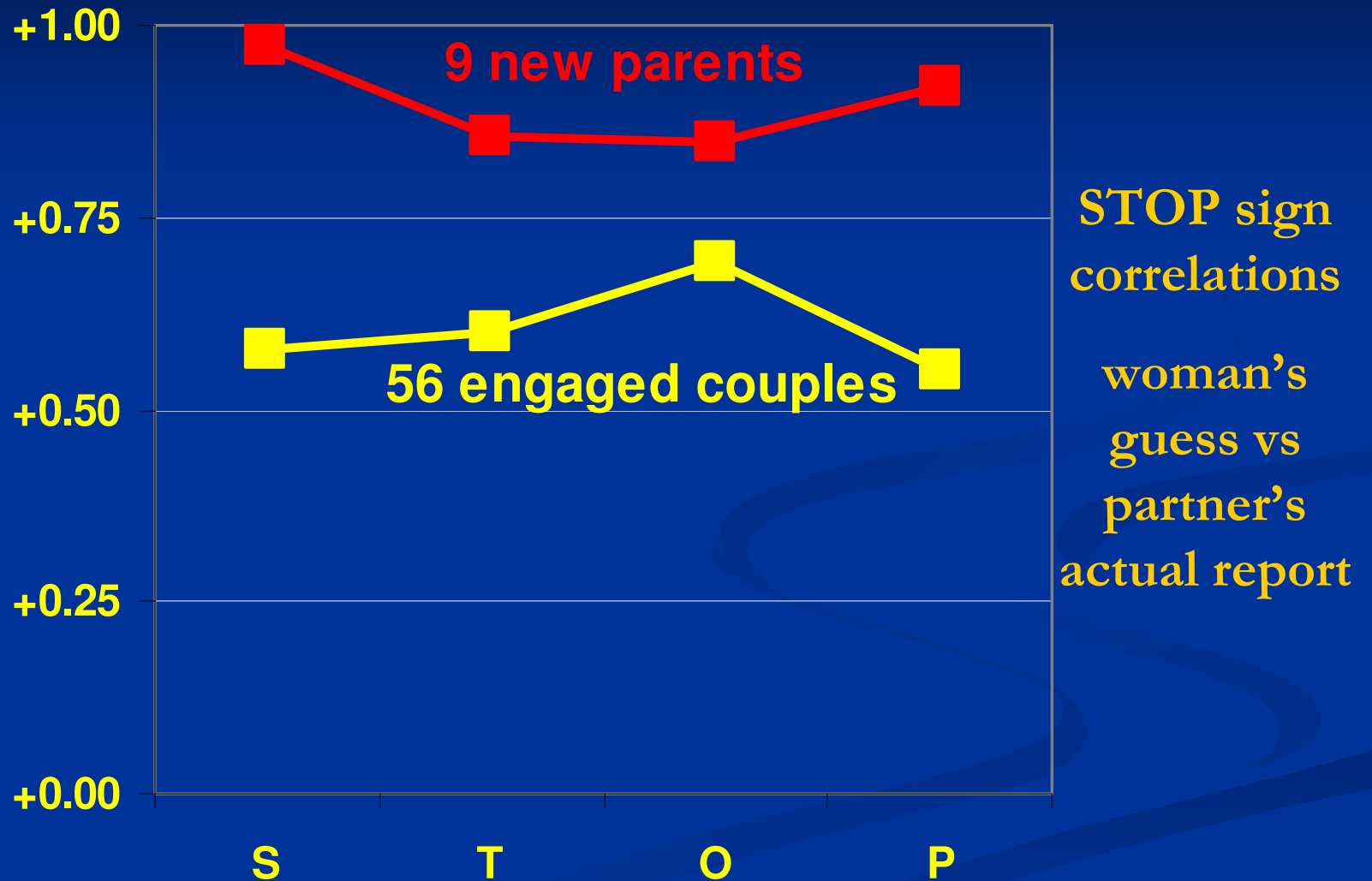
Study design

- 1 hour *Lets Stick Together*
- Includes *STOP signs*
- 19 Bristol NHS post-natal clinics
- 236 mothers in 31 sessions
- 69% married, 31% cohabiting
- Mother self-report *STOP signs*

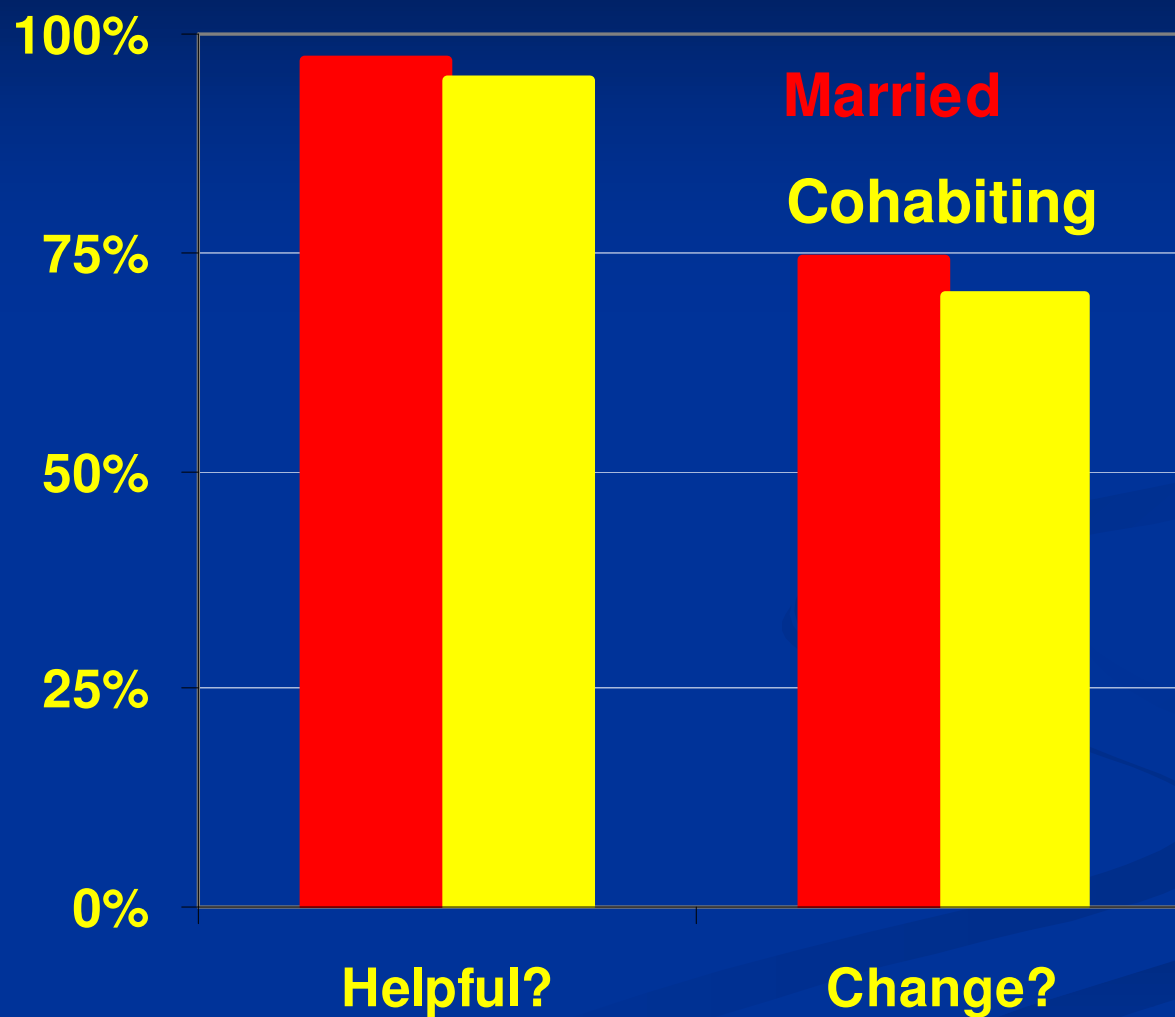
#1 Post-natal mums are smart



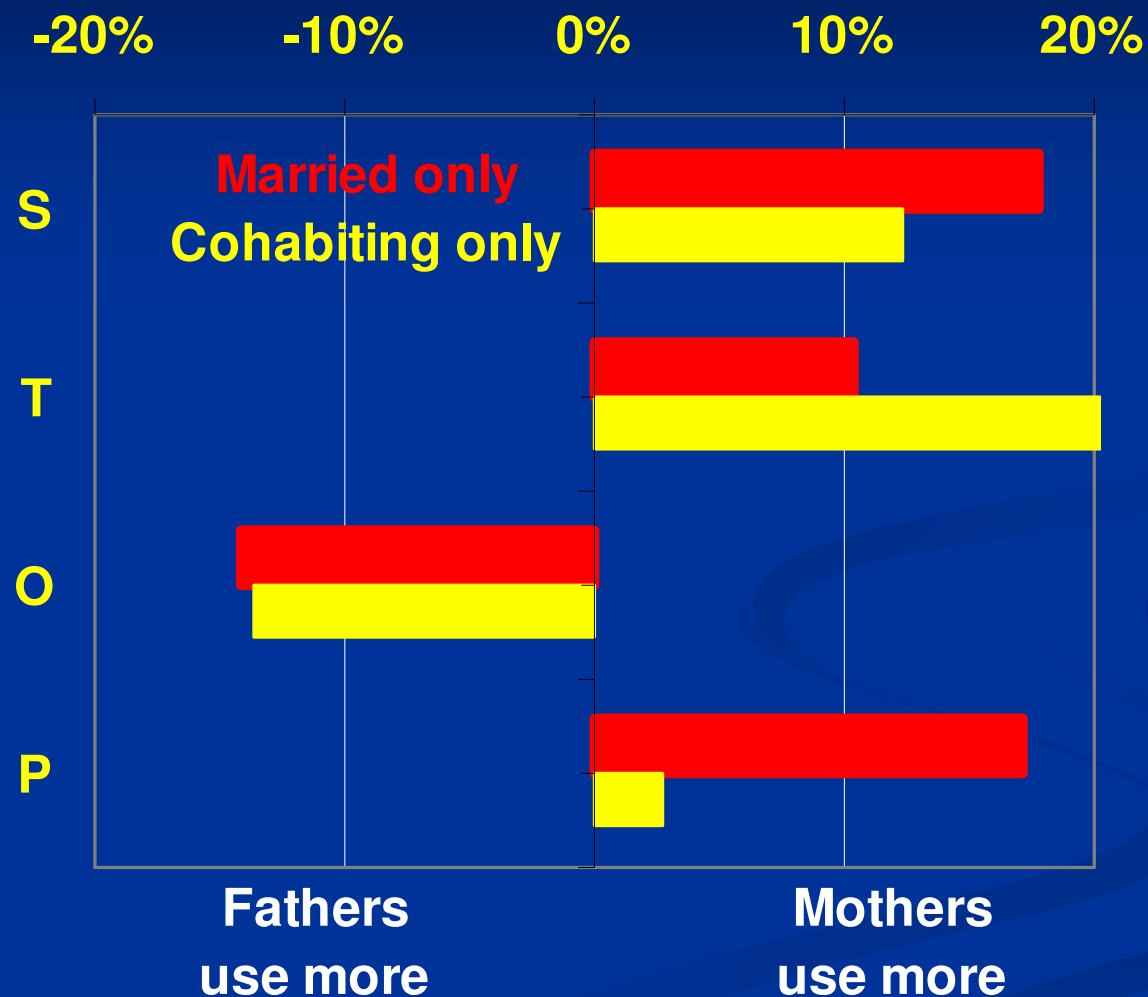
#2 Women know their men!



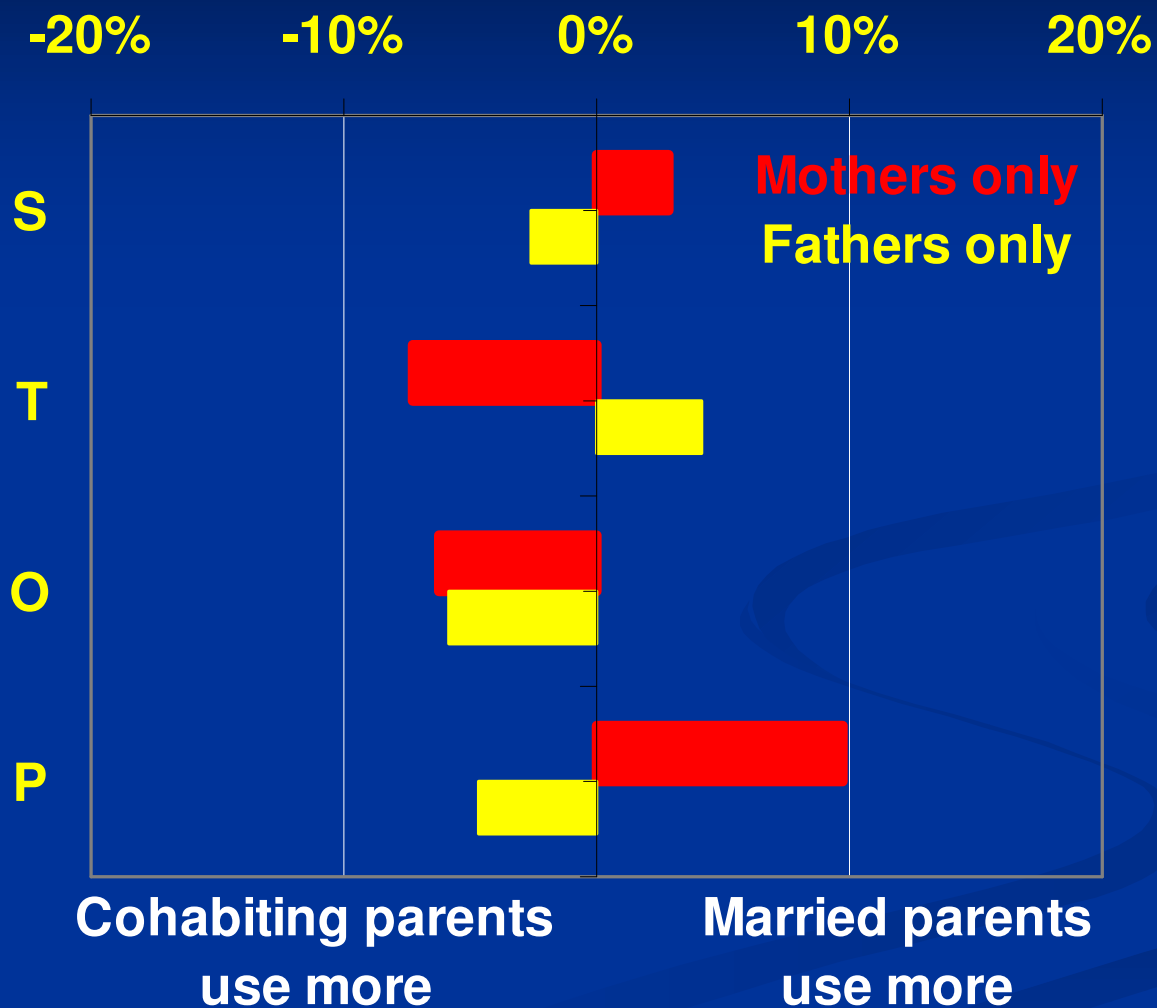
#3 Mums like STOP signs



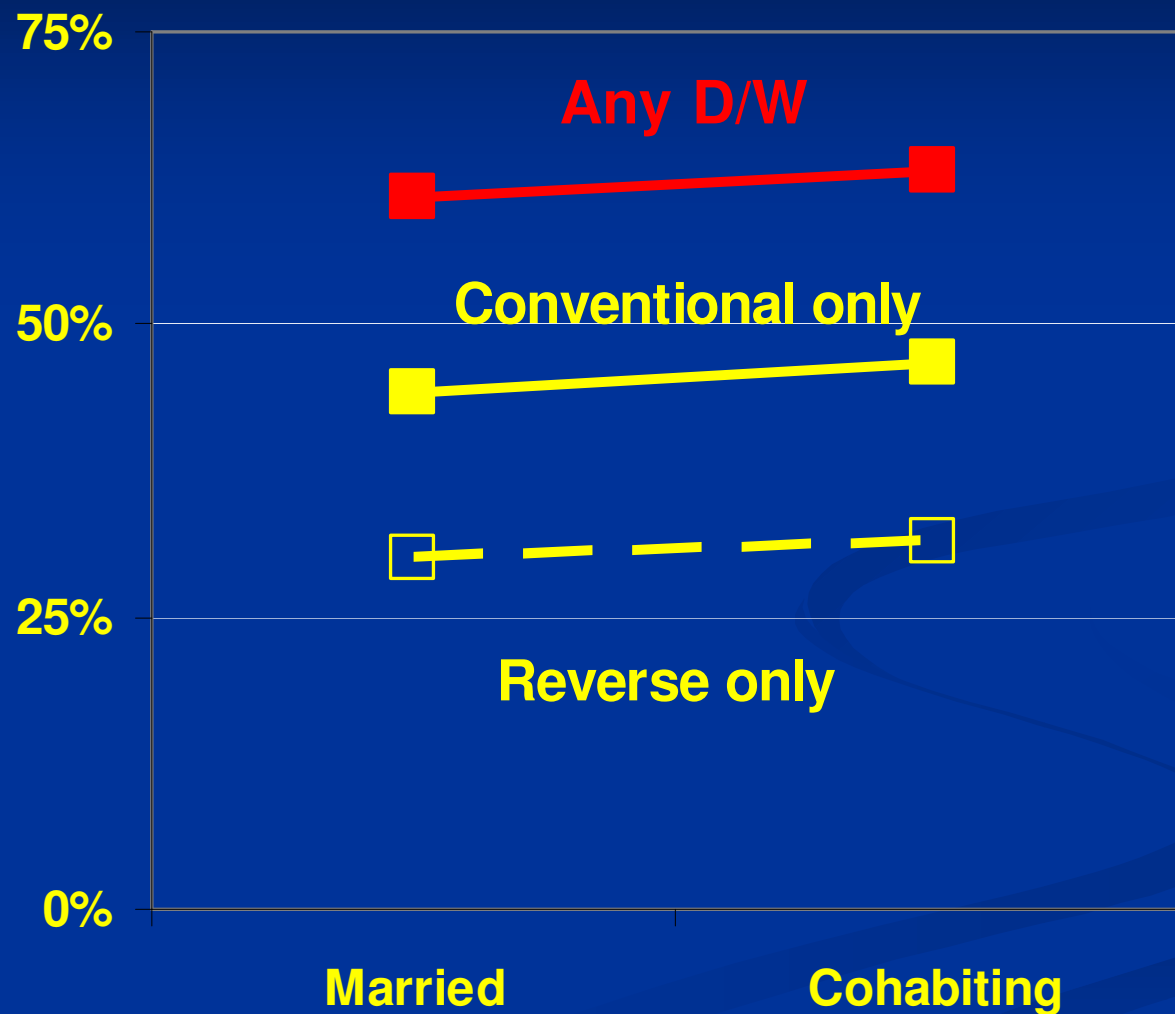
#4 STOP signs differ by gender...



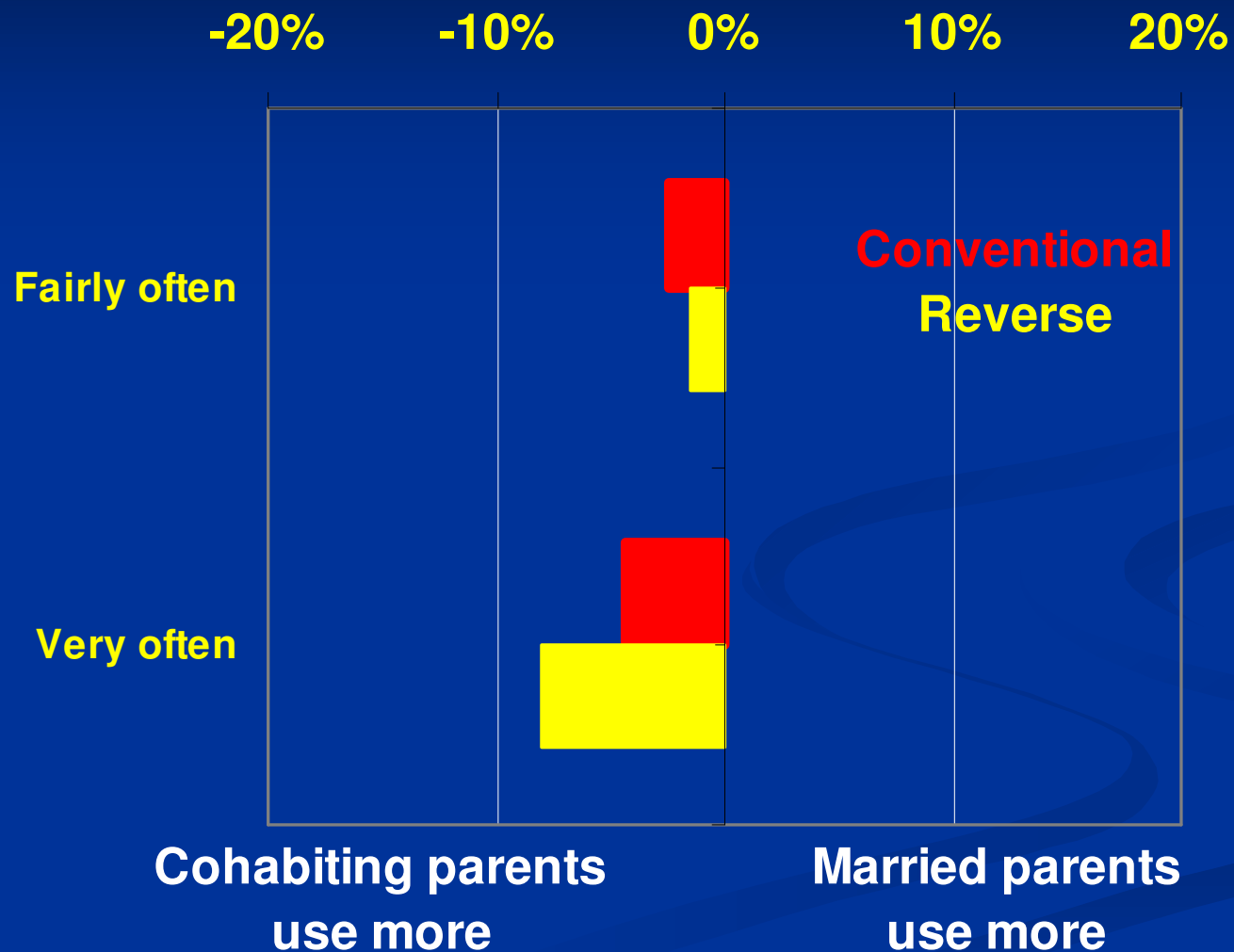
#5 ...but not by marital status



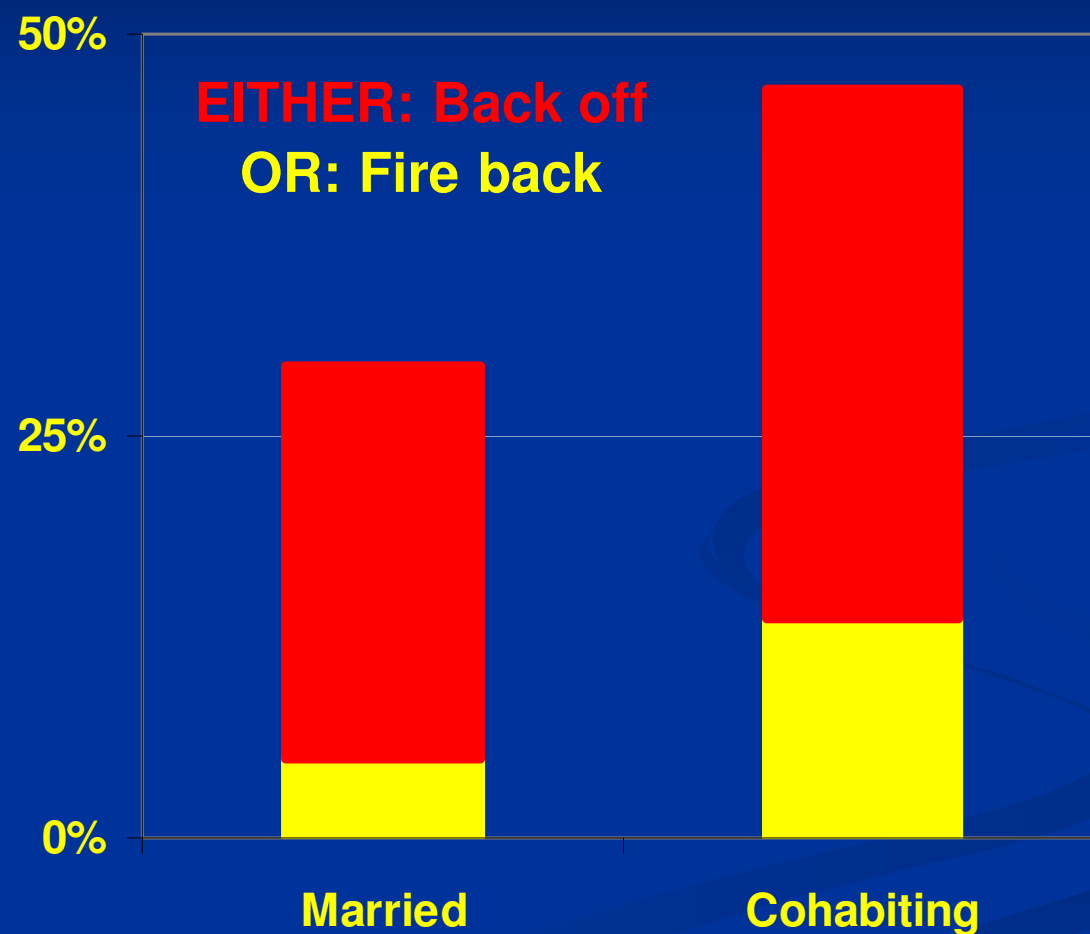
#6a Demand-withdraw is common



#6b ...but reverses in extremes



#7 The main finding about cohabiting parents



Why might parents ... ?

... Back off?

- **Less committed fathers** may OPT OUT because they have less incentive to resolve the issue
- **Less secure mothers** may OPT OUT because escalation could put the whole relationship at risk

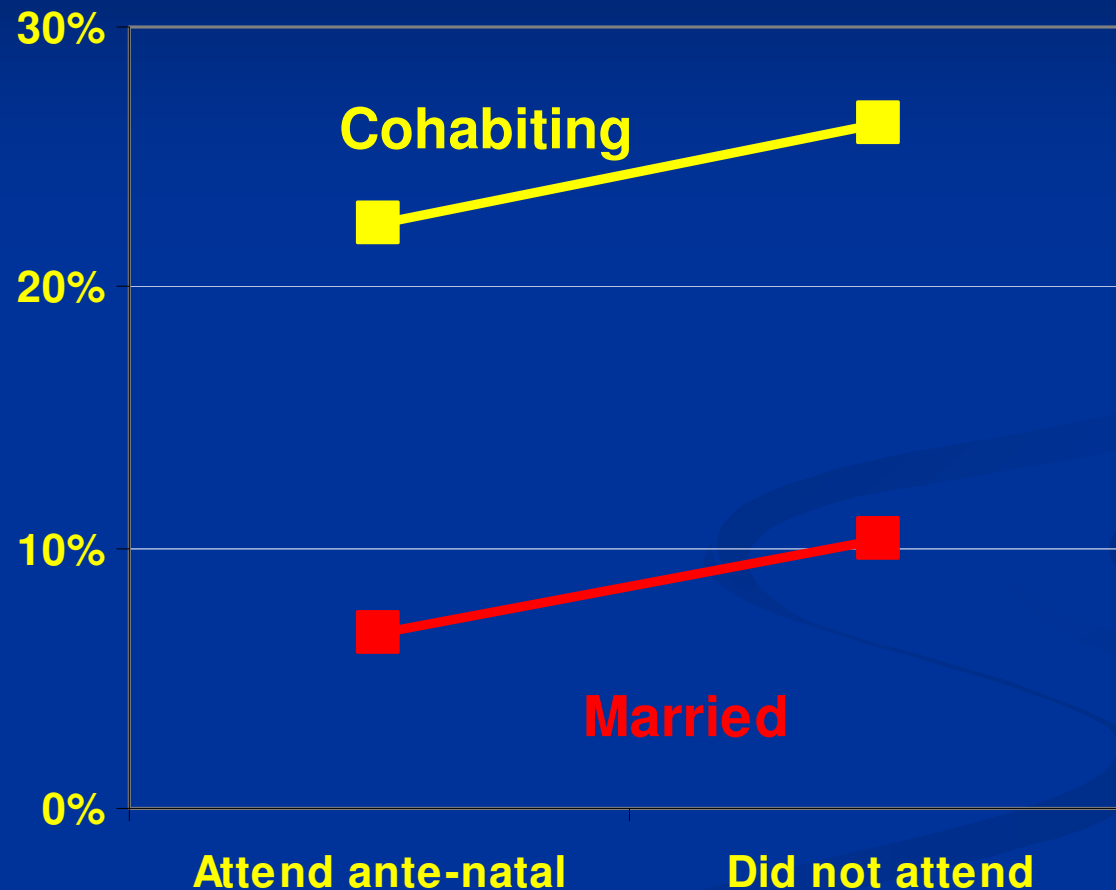
... Fire back?

- **Less committed fathers** may PUT DOWN because they have less to lose by behaving dismissively
- **Less secure mothers** may THINK THE WORST because they interpret conflict as a threat to their relationship. They may then SCORE POINTS or PUT DOWN as a defence mechanism

Main conclusions

- This study provides support for the hypothesis that cohabiting fathers are less committed and cohabiting mothers are less secure.
- The main finding is that cohabiting parents behave differently to married parents
- The complex nature of these interactions points to much more than a selection effect
- The big discrepancy in negative behaviours fits with the big discrepancy in negative relationship outcomes
- Causal conclusions remain speculative at this stage

Selection? Ante-natal class attendance & 5 year break-up risk



(Source: Millennium Cohort Study)

Immediate implication

- STOP signs are an excellent example of simple, practical and effective relationship education
- 96% of mothers found STOP signs “*helpful*”
- Most mothers found STOP signs “*very helpful*”
- Amongst parents who either “*back off*” or “*fire back*”, 71% of married and 74% of cohabiting mothers say they are likely to change their behaviour as a result

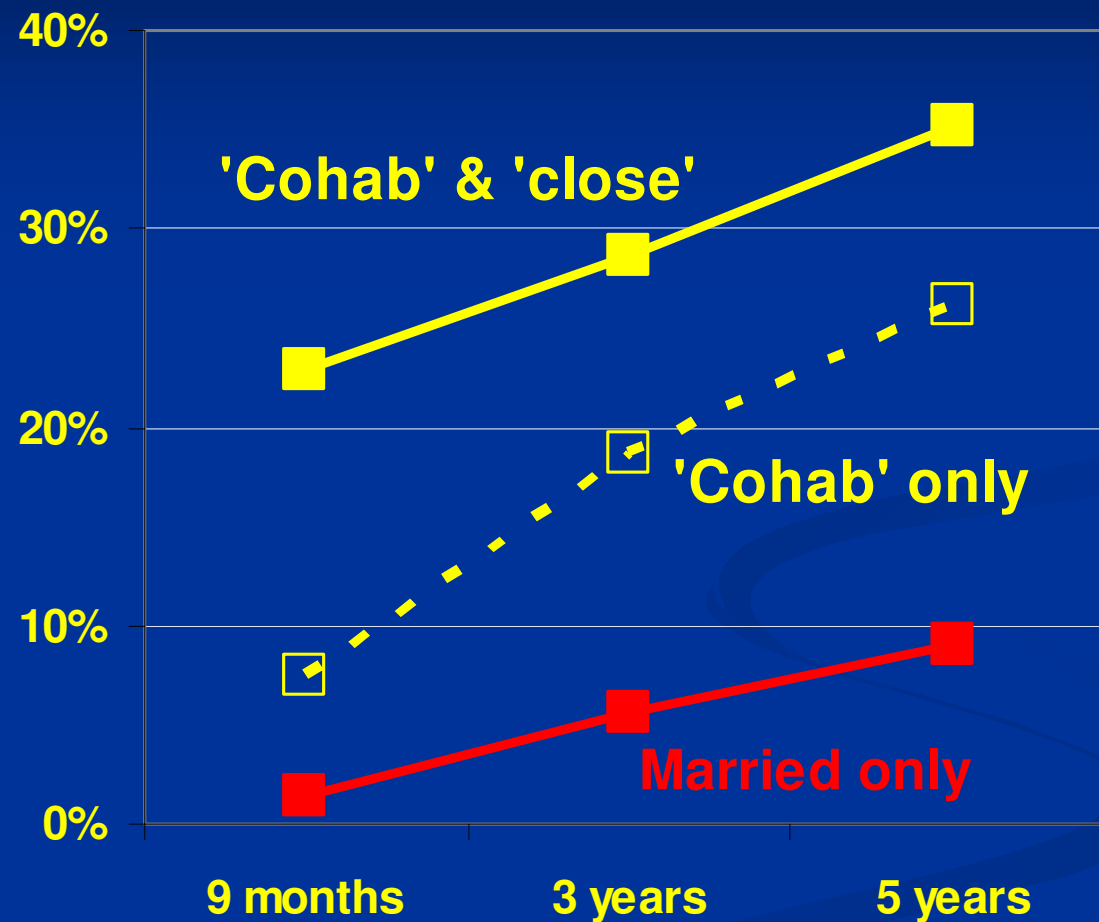
Next steps

- Study opens the way for investigation of the longitudinal links between commitment, security, behaviour & stability

Extra slides

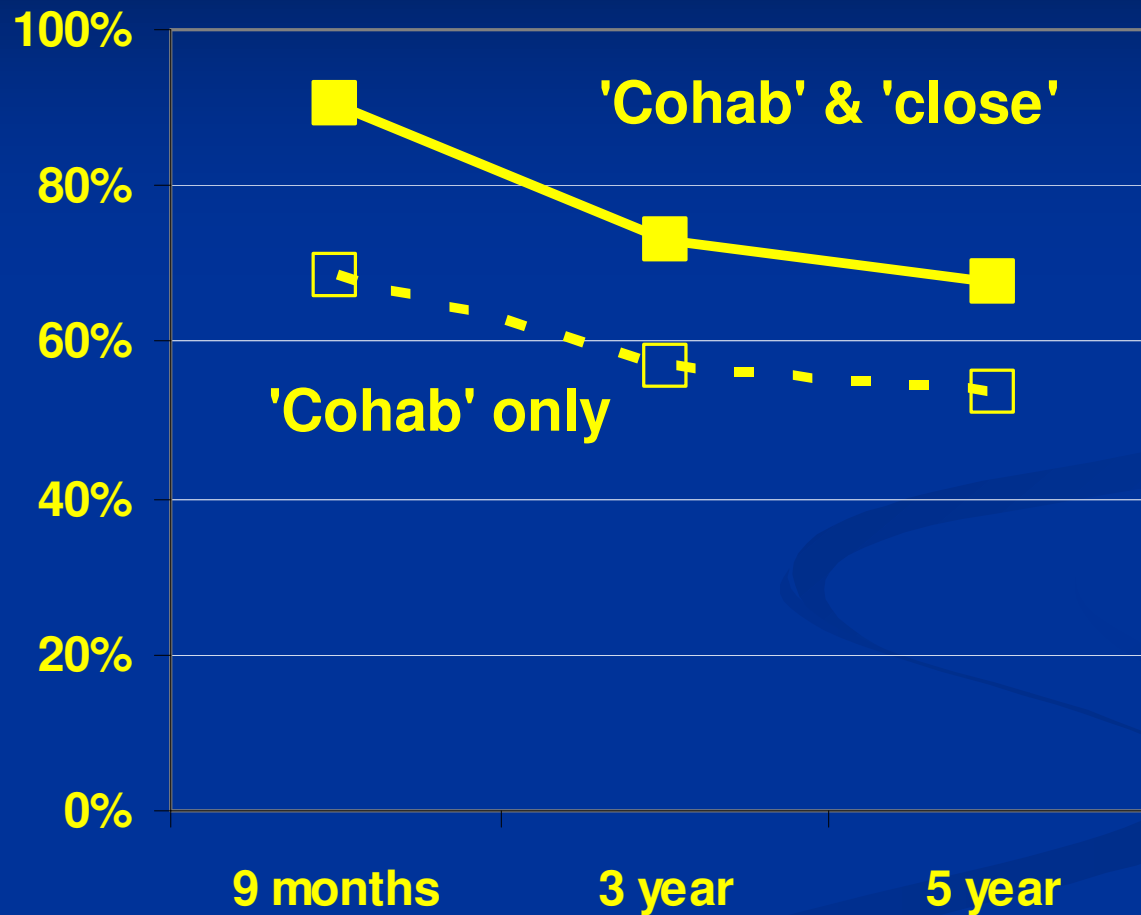
Discussion

Break-up risk & new parents



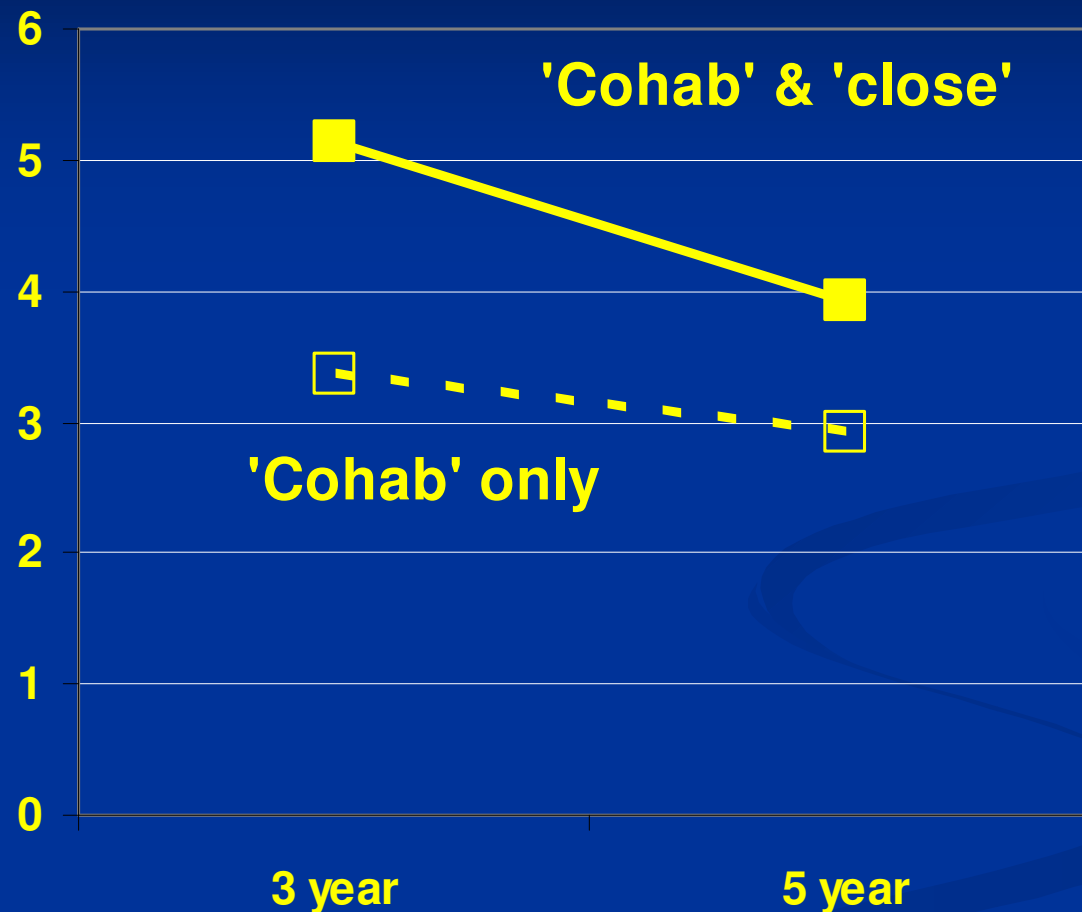
(Source: Millennium Cohort Study - Benson 2006 & unpublished)

Unmarried as % of break-up



(Source: Millennium Cohort Study - Benson 2006 & ...)

Unmarried vs married risk



(Source: Millennium Cohort Study - Benson 2006 & ...)

Religious dissimilarity & 3 year break-up

