



**Dr Matthew Gray**  
**Deputy Director – Research**  
Telephone: +61 3 9214 7881  
Facsimile: +61 3 9214 7850  
Email: [Matthew.Gray@aifs.gov.au](mailto:Matthew.Gray@aifs.gov.au)

20 August 2008

Mr Peter Hallahan  
Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on  
Legal and Constitutional Affairs  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Hallahan

In the course of our evidence to the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs on Wednesday 6 August 2008, Ms Weston inadvertently provided incorrect statistics regarding the duration of cohabitation in response to Senator Barnett's question on this matter (see Hansard Reference F&PA page 8).

Ms Weston replied: "It would be difficult to provide trends for cohabitation but we do know, on the basis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia study of 2005, that, of cohabiting couples who had separated, 42 per cent did so before two years had elapsed since they started cohabiting. In other words, 58 per cent had separated after two years."

In fact, these statistics refer to the current duration of cohabitation. That is, 42 per cent in the sample had been living together for less than two years.

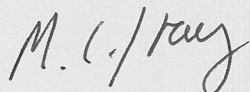
The following information refers to the first unions experienced by people who cohabited rather than married at the outset, and is based on wave 1 of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey (undertaken in 2001).

- For those who began cohabiting in the early 1990s and who had separated by the time of the 2001 survey, the median duration of the cohabiting period was 2 years. However, 8% of respondents who began cohabiting in the early 1990s were still cohabiting with the same partner at the time of the survey.
- For each of the three cohorts who began cohabiting in the late 1970s and in the early and late 1980s and who had separated by the time of the 2001 survey, the median duration of the cohabiting period was also 2 years. The proportion who were still cohabiting with the same partner at the time of the survey ranged from 1% to 4%.
- For those who began cohabiting in the early 1970s and who had separated by the time of the 2001 survey, the median duration of cohabitation was 1 year. Only 1% of these people were still cohabiting with the same partner at the time of the survey.

A Table setting out this information is provided on page 5 of our Response to Questions on Notice.

We apologise for unintentionally misinforming the Committee. We would be grateful if you would draw this letter to the attention of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. C. Gray". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "G" at the end.

**Dr Matthew Gray**  
**Deputy Director (Research)**



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**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs

## Inquiry into the Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Bill 2008

Response to Questions on Notice  
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Authorised by:  
Professor Alan Hayes, Director

19 August 2008

## Overview

### Response to Questions on Notice

On 6 August 2008, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (the Institute) appeared in Melbourne before the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (the Committee) to inform its Inquiry into the Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Bill 2008 (the Inquiry).

The Committee asked the Institute a number of questions, which the Institute took on notice. This document sets out the Institute's response to the Questions on Notice.

### Hansard correction

The Proof Committee Hansard transcript of the hearing on 6 August 2008 contained a few typographical errors. This document provides corrections of the more significant errors.

### Submission correction

On 30 July 2008, the Institute provided a submission to the Committee to inform its Inquiry. In this submission, a word was inadvertently omitted and this omission changed the meaning of the sentence. This document sets out the correction to the Institute's submission.

## Response to Questions on Notice

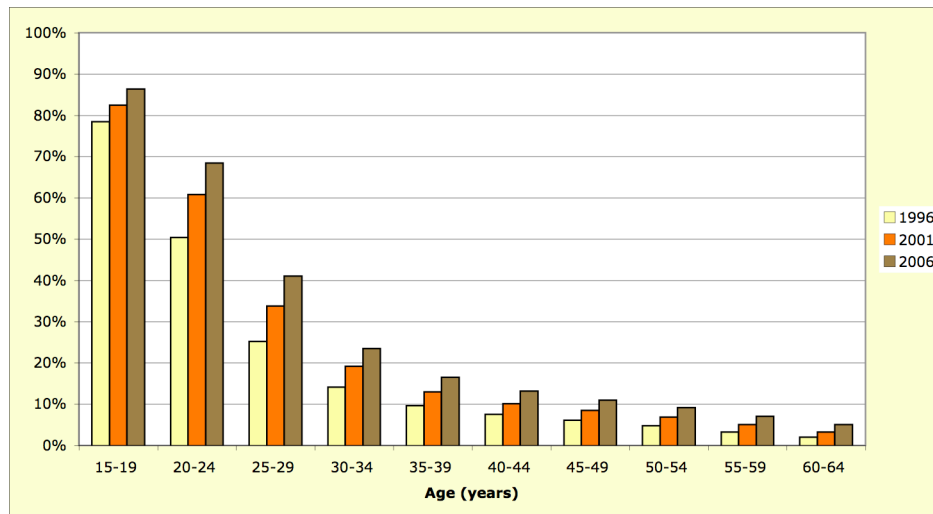
### *Senate question (1)*

On page 3 of the Proof Committee Hansard transcript Senator Trood asked that the Institute provide the Committee with statistics about marriage and cohabitation trends over time.

### *Response (1)*

The proportions of partnered people in different age groups who were cohabiting (rather than married) in 1996, 2001 and 2006 have been compiled (see Figure below). These data indicate that cohabitation has become more prevalent with each successive census, although most couples were married. Cohabiting relationships are more common among young people than older people. However, among individuals who were living with a partner, the proportion who were cohabiting increased from 1996 to 2006 across all age groups. In other words, the proportion of partnered people who were married fell across all age groups. This trend is particularly marked for those in their twenties.

## Persons living with a partner: per cent cohabiting, 1996, 2001 & 2006



Note: Based on place of usual residence

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue no. 2060.0

## Senate question (2)

On page 3 of the Proof Committee Hansard transcript Senator Trood asked that the Institute advise the Committee as to whether the institution of marriage continues to 'hold people's affection'.

## Institute response (2)

In support of Dr Gray's reply to this question, the Institute has published the following two articles that suggest that marriage is viewed favourably. These articles can be downloaded from the Institute's website.

Qu, L. & Weston, R. (2008). Attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation. *Family Relationships Quarterly* Newsletter No. 8

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/afr/pubs/newsletter/newsletter8.html>

The article examines views of Australians aged 15 years and older regarding whether: "Marriage is outdated institution", and "It is alright for an unmarried couple to love together even if they have no intention of marrying". It reports widespread endorsement of marriage as an institution (applying to two thirds), though a substantial minority considered marriage as an outdated institution or did not provide a clear view on this issue. This pattern applied to all age groups. On the other hand, most people expressed their approval of cohabitation even in the absence of any intention to marry. Rates of approval of cohabitation declined from age 40-49 years onward.

Smart, D. (2002). Relationships, marriage and parenthood: views of young people and their parents. *Family Matters*, 63, 28-35.

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2002/fm63/ds.pdf>

The analysis in this article was based on the reports of Victorian teenagers and their parents who have participated in the Australian Temperament Project since the children were infants. The data were collected in 2000 when the children were 17-18 years old. The article reports that the teenagers generally held positive views about marriage. Eight in ten indicated that they hoped to marry and few rejected the idea of marrying.

### ***Senate question (3)***

On page 6 of the Proof Committee Hansard transcript Dr Gray offered to provide a copy of the Institute's paper on the wellbeing of 4 to 5 year old children whose parents were in cohabiting relationships.

### ***Institute response (3)***

A copy of the relevant PowerPoint presentation is attached to this document. The analysis is based mainly on the reports of parents. The results suggest that, compared with children whose parents were married to each other, those whose parents were cohabiting with each other were faring less well in terms of physical and social/emotional development and learning. Furthermore, compared with the married couple families, the cohabiting couple families tended to have lower socio-economic status and were characterised by less favourable parenting practices and poorer co-parental relationships. These differences largely explained the differences in the wellbeing of the children in the two types of families. Cohabiting parents were also more likely than married parents to separate. However, the gap in the wellbeing of children in these two types of families remained evident among families in which the parents did not separate.

### ***Senate question (4)***

On page 8 of the Proof Committee Hansard transcript Senator Barnett asked that the Institute to provide information about the duration of marriages.

### ***Institute response (4)***

The probability of a marriage ending in divorce appears to have been increasing. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2007), 33% of all marriages that began in 2000-2002 could be expected to end in divorce, compared with 28% of all marriages that began in 1985-1987. However, the estimated expected duration of marriages that end in divorce has increased. The ABS (2007) reports that, among men who obtained a divorce from their first marriage, the average expected duration of their marriage increased from 11 years for those who married in 1985-1987 to 14 years for those who married 2000-2002.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007), *Australian Social Trends 2007*. Catalogue No. 4102.0.

### ***Senate question (5)***

On page 8 of the Proof Committee Hansard transcript Senator Barnett asked that the Institute to provide information about the duration of cohabitation relationships.

### ***Institute response (5)***

The following information refers to outcomes of the first unions experienced by people who cohabited rather than married at the outset, and is based on wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (undertaken in 2001). The Table below sets out the median duration of the cohabiting period for those who separated and the proportion of people who were still cohabiting at the time of the 2001 survey. Some of these people would eventually separate (or marry) and the median duration of cohabitation to separation would then change slightly.

**Median duration of first cohabitation to separation and percentage who were still living together in 2001**

Year began living together	Median duration to separation (years)	Per cent still cohabiting at 2001 survey
1970-74	1	1.4
1975-79	2	0.8
1980-84	2	1.8
1985-89	2	4.3
1990-94	2	7.8

*Source: HILDA, 2001.*

*Note: First cohabitation following marriage are excluded*

## Hansard corrections

The Institute seeks to have the following typographical and grammatical errors in the Hansard transcript of 6 August 2008 corrected to clarify meaning and improve readability:

Hansard Reference	Typographical or grammatical error	Corrected text
F&PA page 6, 2 <sup>nd</sup> paragraph	45 year old cohort	4 to 5 year old cohort
F&PA page 6 2 <sup>nd</sup> paragraph	When we control for these other factors I have talked about—the differences in developmental outcomes of the two groups of children—we are looking at only a short space of time. Those differences are no longer significant.	When we control for these other factors I have talked about, the differences in developmental outcomes of the two groups of children—we are looking at only a short space of time—those differences are no longer significant.
F&PA page 8 8 <sup>th</sup> paragraph	<i>Household, income and labour dynamics in Australia</i> study	<i>Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia</i> study

## Institute submission corrections

The Institute seeks to correct an error that appeared in its submission to the Inquiry, as follows:

Institute submission reference	Incorrect text	Corrected text
Page 3, 1 <sup>st</sup> full paragraph. 2 <sup>nd</sup> sentence	The 2006 Census data indicate that there were 261,600 families in which parents were cohabiting with dependent children. This represents 11% of all families with dependent children.	The 2006 Census data indicate that there were 261,600 families in which parents were cohabiting with dependent children. This represents 11% of all <b>couple</b> families with dependent children.



# Parental cohabitation and children's well-being

Lixia Qu & Ruth Weston

Paper presented at the 10th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, 9–11 July 2008,  
Melbourne



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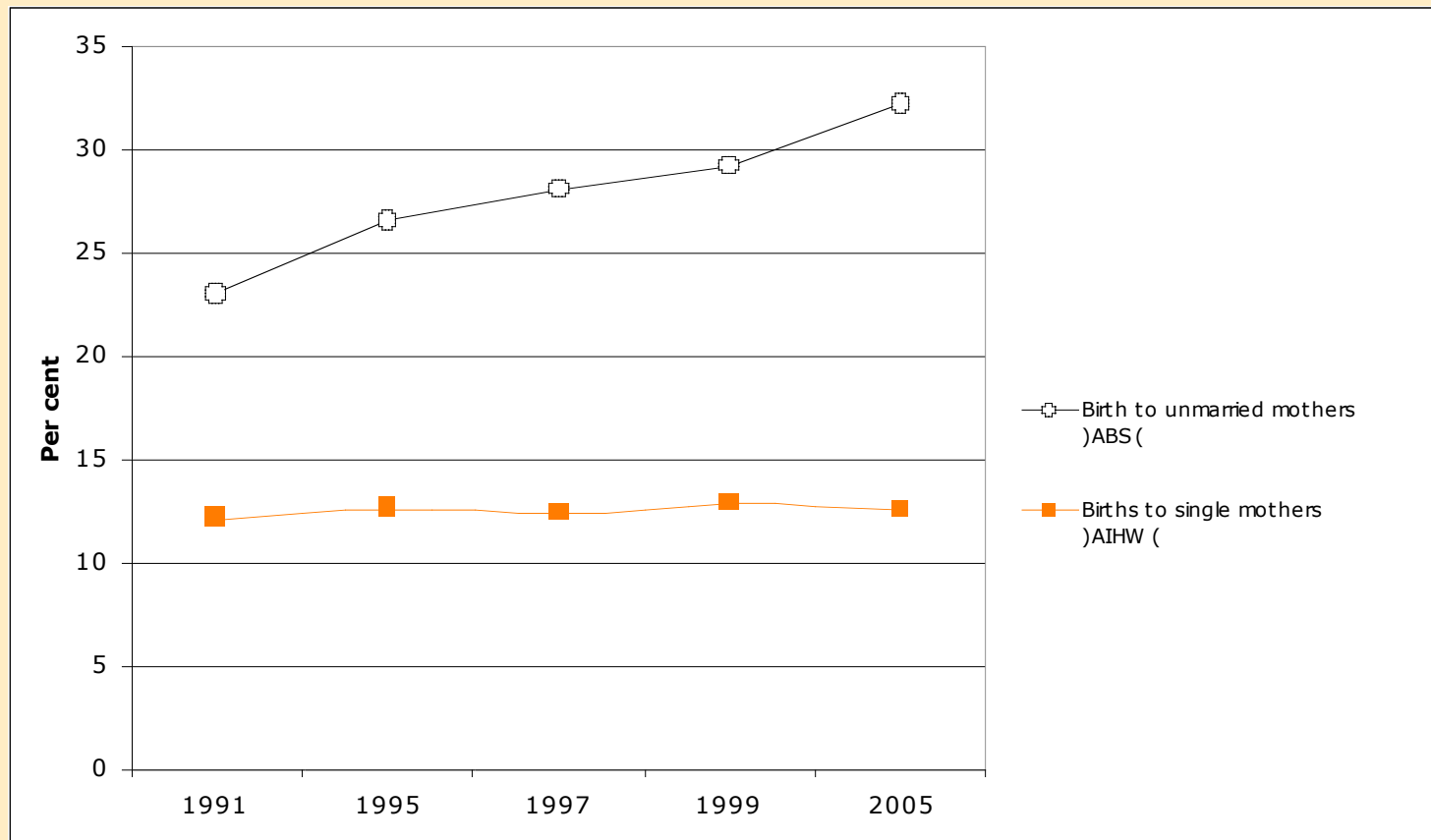
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# Research background

- **Rise in cohabitation**
  - ◆ 6% in 1986
  - ◆ 15% in 2006
  - ◆ more prevalent among young people
- **Rise exnuptial births**
  - ◆ One third of births
  - ◆ Most born to cohabiting couples



# Proportions of exnuptial births & births to single mothers



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# Does marital status of parents matter?

- **Marriage and cohabitation become alike**
  - ◆ Like other developed countries, cohabiting couples in Australia have gained some legal rights as married couples.
  - ◆ Little distinction in family law in relation to issues related to children between cohabiting couples & married couples
- **Marriage more committed than cohabiting relationship**
  - ◆ Greater investment in children
  - ◆ Other intrinsic benefits



# Overseas research

- **Compared with children with 2-bio married parents, children with 2-bio cohabiting parents:**
  - ◆ worse off in cognitive and psychological development (*e.g., Artis 2007; Brown 2004; Osborne et al. 2003*)
  - ◆ different family environment – fewer economic resources and parental resources
    - the deficit => poorer outcomes of children



# Research questions

## Using data of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) to address:

- ◆ Are children living with 2-biological cohabiting parents worse off than children living with 2-biological married parents?
- ◆ If so, does difference change over time?



# The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

- **Funded by the Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**
- **Two cohorts of children**
  - ◆ March 2003-February 2004 – Infants
  - ◆ March 1999-February 2000 – 4-5 year olds
  - ◆ About 5000 children in each cohort
- **Data collection**
  - ◆ Wave 1, 2004
  - ◆ Wave 2, 2006



# Children's well-being measures

## 4-5 year-olds:

- **Three outcomes indices**

- ◆ Physical domain (motor, health – mainly parents' assessment)
- ◆ Social/emotional domain (social competency, internalizing, externalizing – parents' assessment)
- ◆ Learning domain (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – PPVT, literacy, numeracy, approach to learning)

Each domain: standardized score, mean=100, sd=10, higher score=better outcome  
(see LSAC technical paper no.2, 2005)

- **Social/emotional development**

- ◆ Teacher's assessment  
(Note: low response rate – one third of children without teacher's assessment)  
Score: 0–40, higher score=worse outcome





# Analysis

- **Cross-sectional analysis (W1)**

- ◆ Comparison of well-being measures between two groups of children
  - Living with 2-bio married parents (ref as married family) (N=3578)
  - Living with 2-bio cohabiting parents (ref as cohabiting family) (N=379)  
(Aboriginal/TSI children excluded)
- ◆ Multivariate analysis
  - Any difference persistent when controlling demographic characteristics of children & mothers, economic resources & parenting practices measures

- **Longitudinal analysis (W1 & W2)**

- ◆ Family stability
- ◆ Change in well-being measures from w1 to w2 for the two groups of children if parents remained together



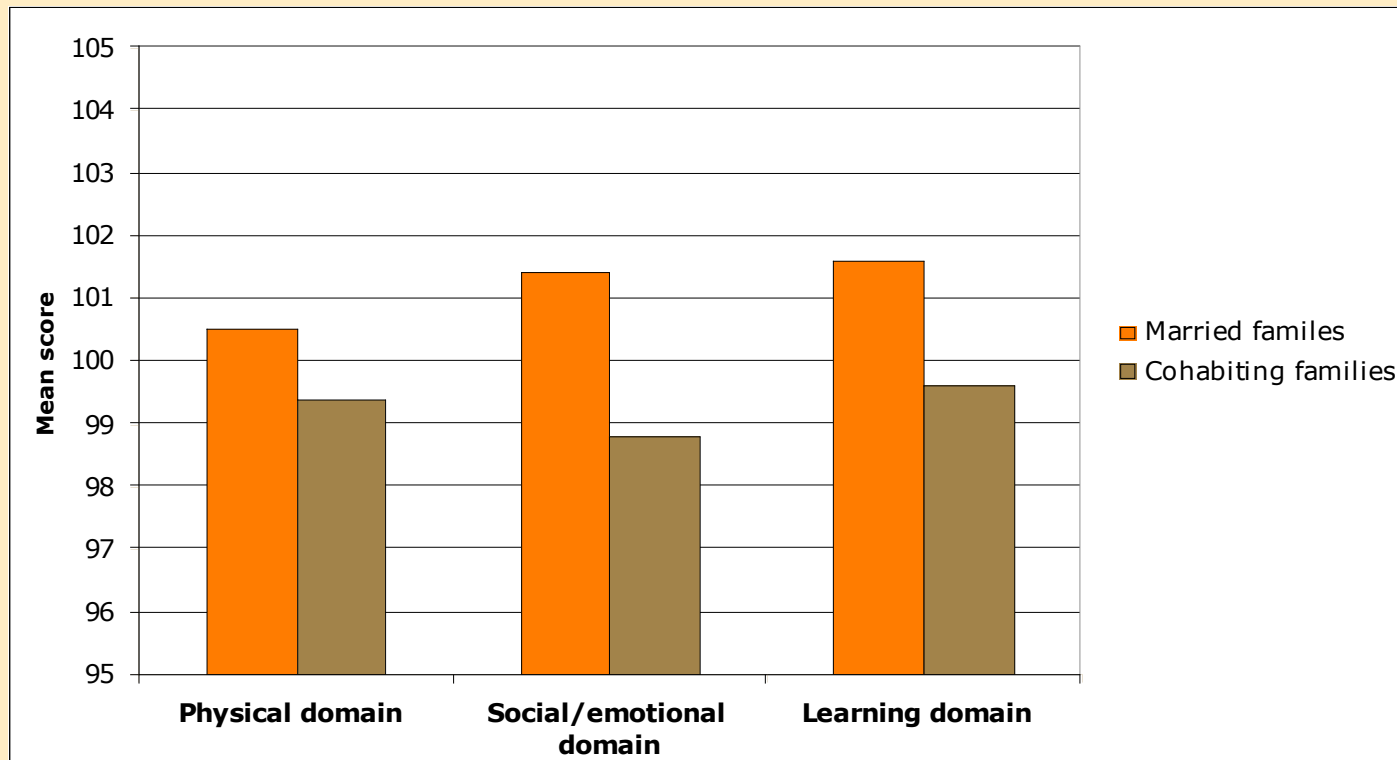
**Are children in cohabiting families  
worse off than children in married  
families?**



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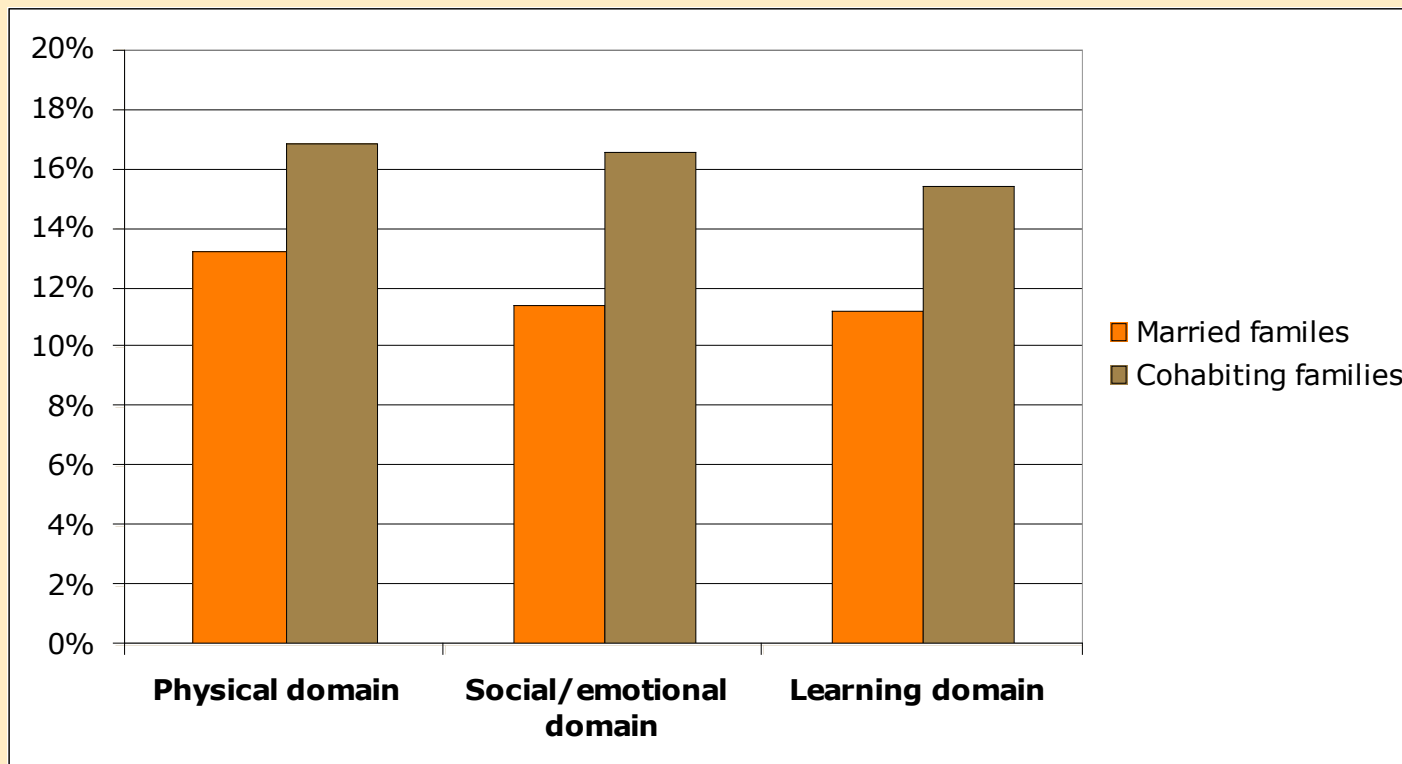
# Children well-being measures: mean scores of three outcome indices



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# Children well-being measures: three outcome indices: % in bottom 15%



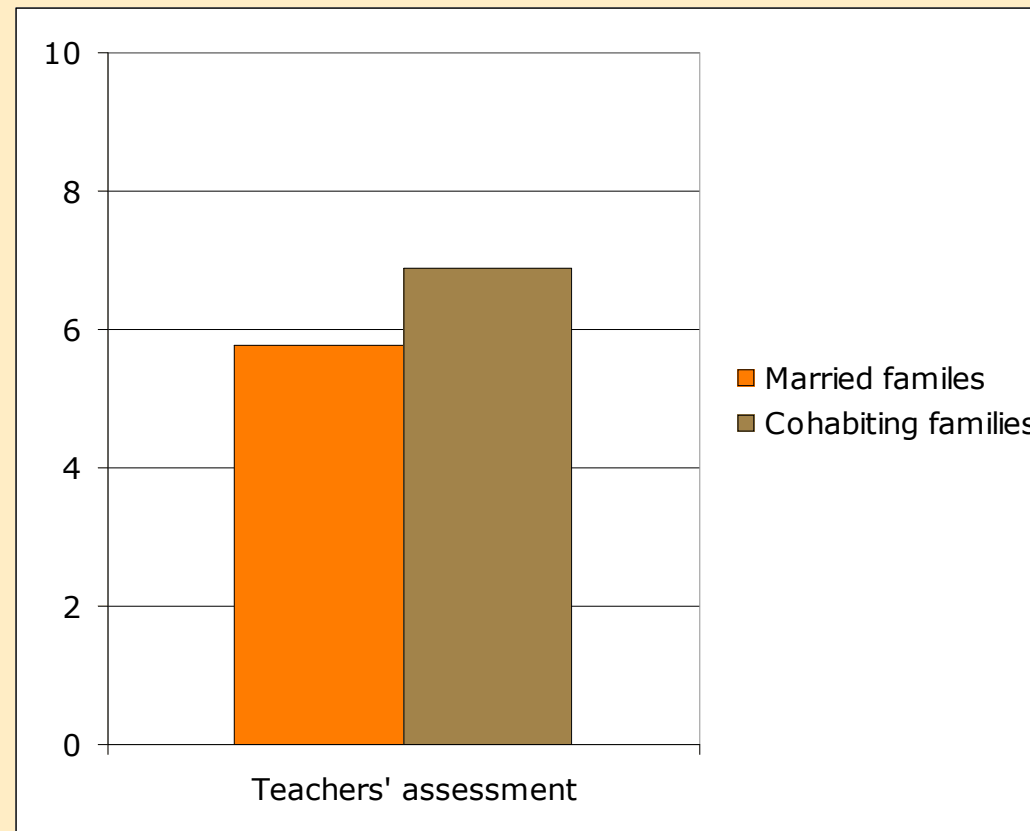
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# Social/emotional development – teachers' assessment

## Mean score

(higher score=worse off)



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# Selected characteristics of children & mothers

	<b>Married families</b>	<b>Cohabiting families</b>
<b>Children</b>		
Boys	50.5%	51.2%
Age (years) (mean)	4.8	4.8
Born in Australia	95.0%	98.4%
<b>Mothers &amp; family financial situation</b>		
Mother's age (mean)	35.3	33.6
Mothers' education - a degree or higher	33.7%	16.1%
Mothers in paid work	61.0%	54.4%
Parental income weekly \$1500 +	41.9%	22.0%
Experienced any financial hardship in the last 12 months	22.7%	39.3%
Self assessed financial situation ~ getting by to very poor	31.3%	37.7%



# Mothers: Parenting practices measures

- **Parental warmth**

- ◆ 6 items, how often: e.g., express affection to the child; have warm and close times together with the child; enjoying listening & doing things with the child;
- ◆ score: 1–5, higher score=better

- **Inductive reasoning**

- ◆ 2 items, how often: e.g., explain to the child why he/she is being corrected;
- ◆ Score 1–5, higher score=better

- **Hostile parenting**

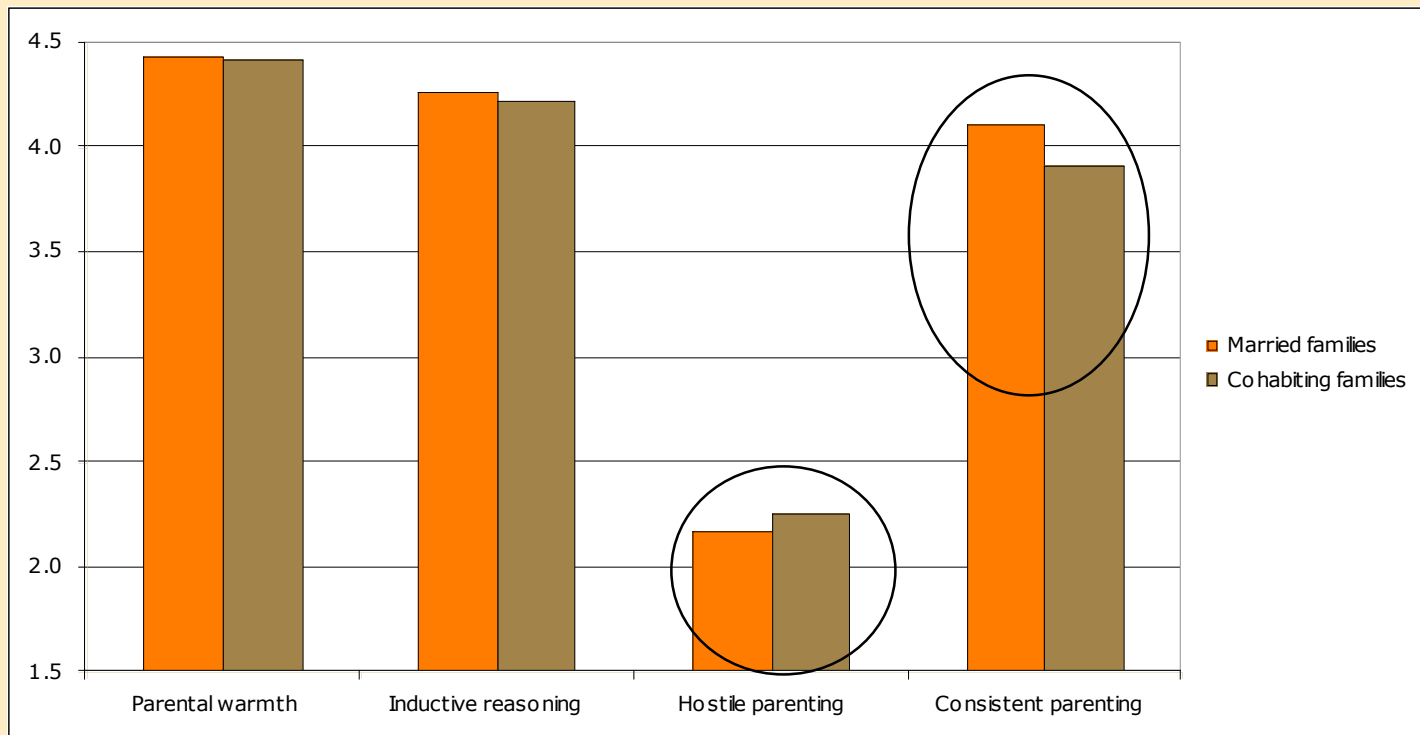
- ◆ 4 items, how often: praise; disapprove; angry when punish the child; feel having problems managing the child in general
- ◆ Score: 1–5, higher score=more angry

- **Consistent parenting**

- ◆ 5 items, how often: e.g., make sure he/she does when giving the child instruction or a request;
- ◆ Score 1–5, higher score=greater consistency



# Mothers: Mean scores of parenting practices measures



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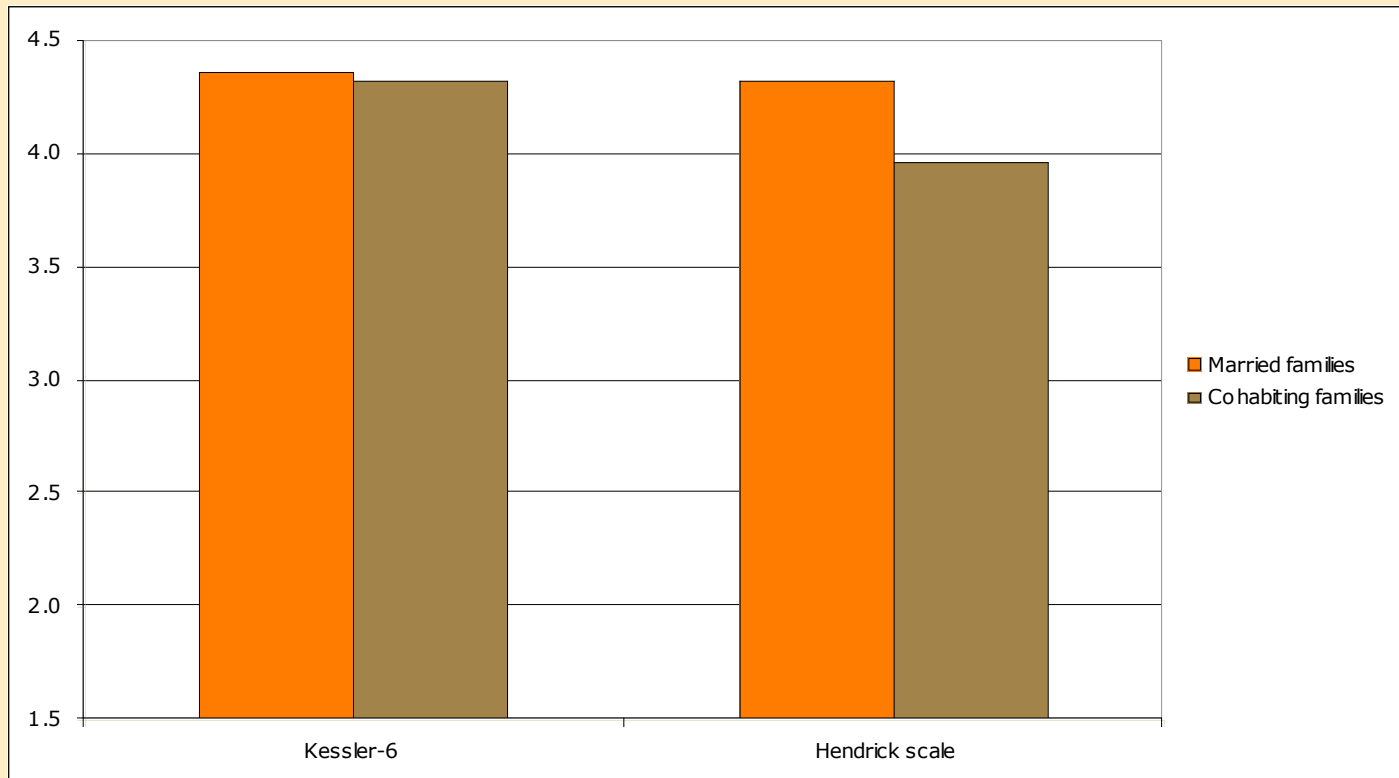


# Mothers: mental health & relationship quality with the current partner

- **Kessler-6 depression scales**
  - ◆ 6 items (nervous, hopeless, restless/fidgety, etc.)
  - ◆ Score: 1–5, higher score=better mental health
- **Hendrick scale of relationship quality**
  - ◆ 6 items (partner meeting your needs; relationship meet original expectation; problems in relationships etc.)
  - ◆ Score: 1–5, higher score=better relationship



# Mothers: mental health & relationship quality with the current partner



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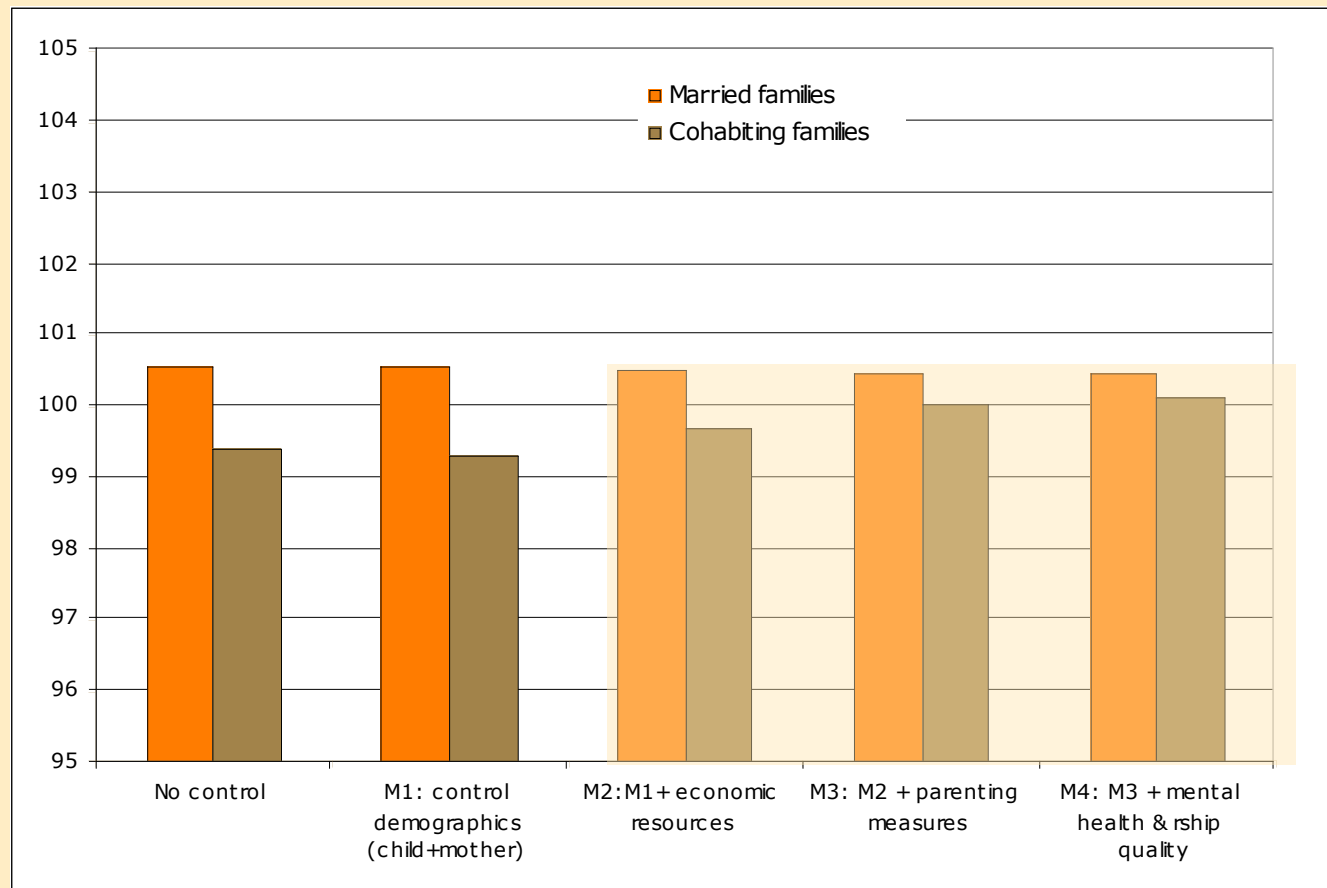
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# Multivariate analysis - regression

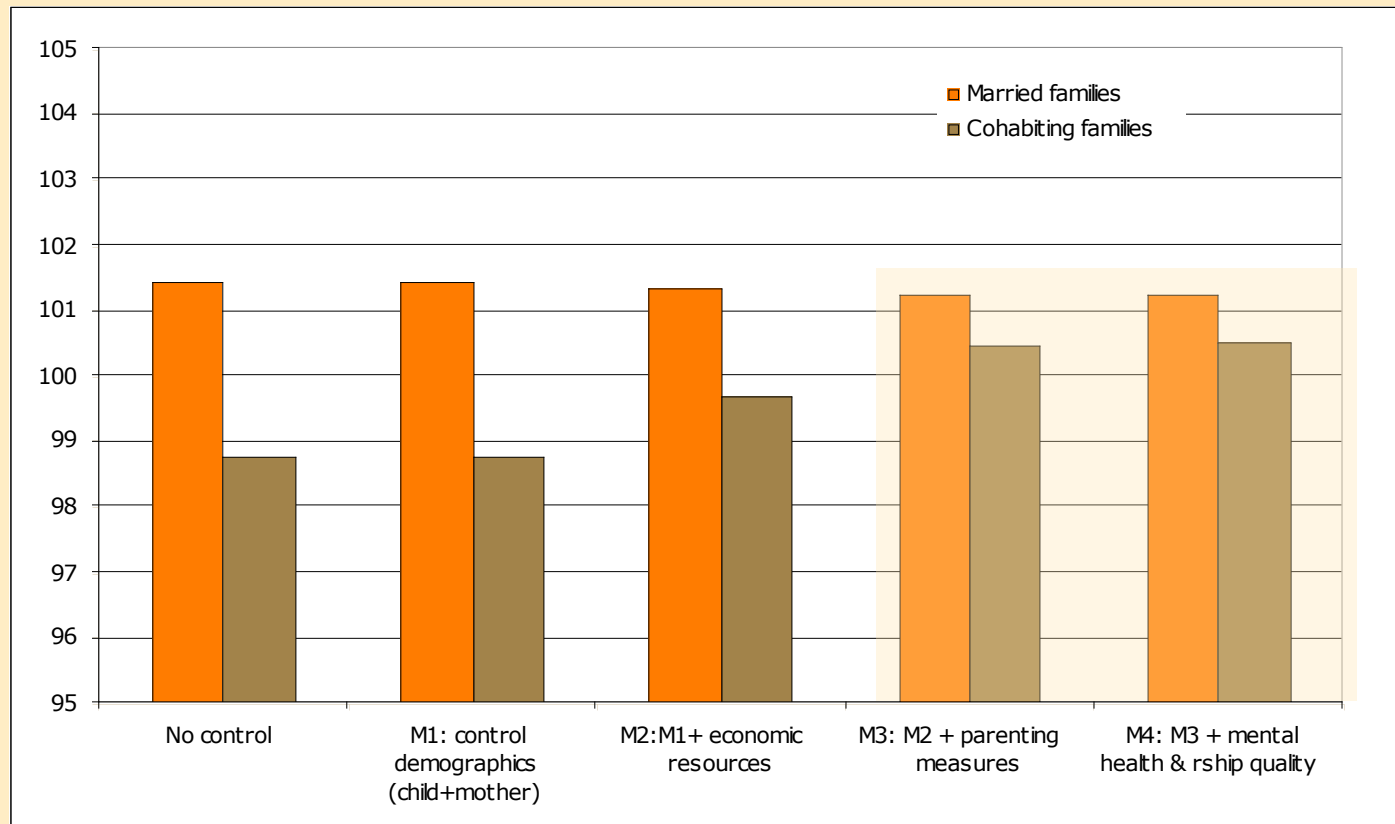
- **Model 1: control characteristics of children and mothers**
- **Model 2: add financial resources measures (mother's education & employment, parental income, whether experienced any financial hardships, self-assessed financial situation)**
- **Model 3: add parenting practices of mothers (parental warmth, inductive reasoning, hostile parenting, & parenting consistency)**
- **Model 4: add mother's mental health and relationship quality**



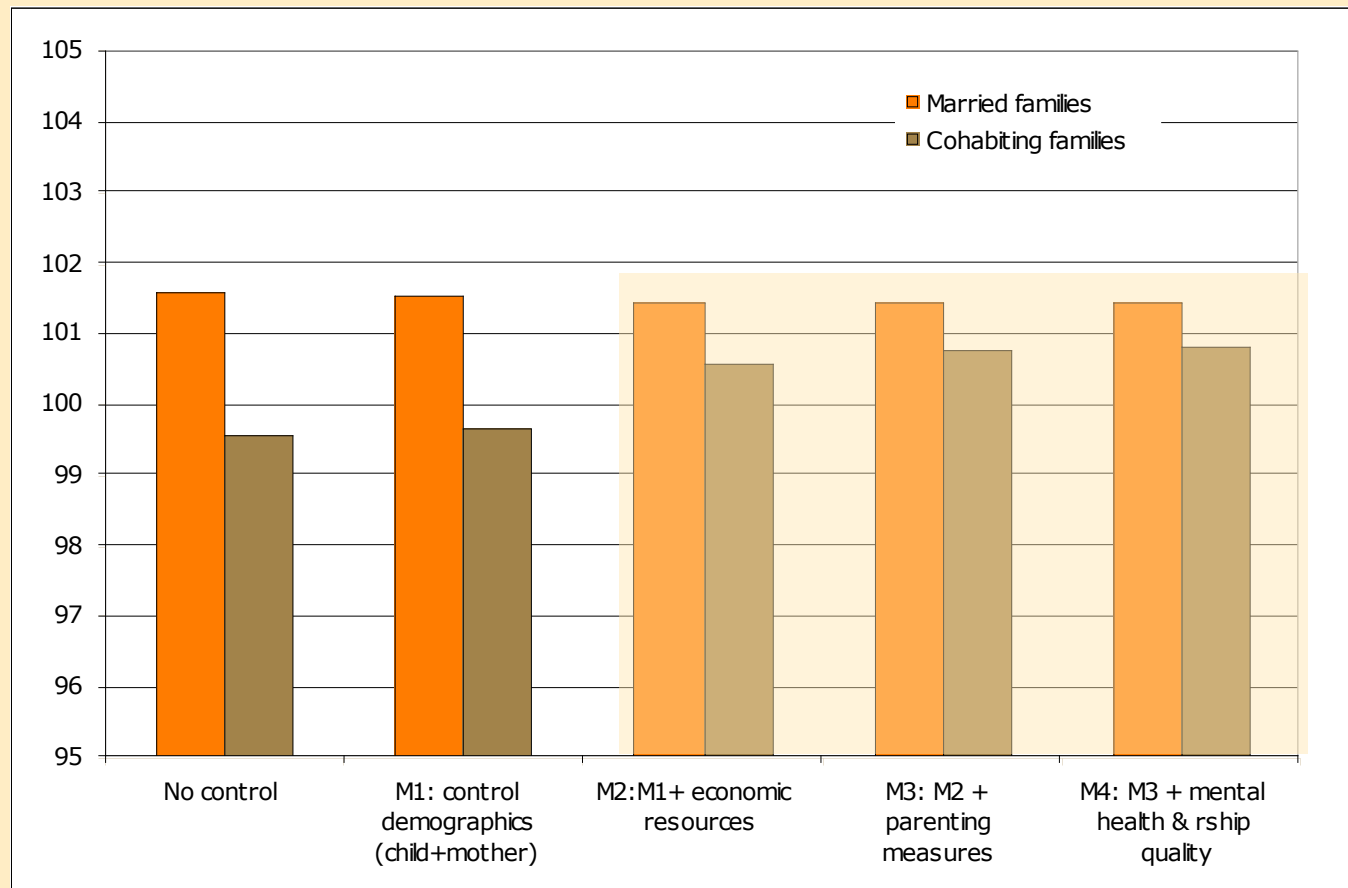
# Children's well-being: Predicted scores of physical outcome index



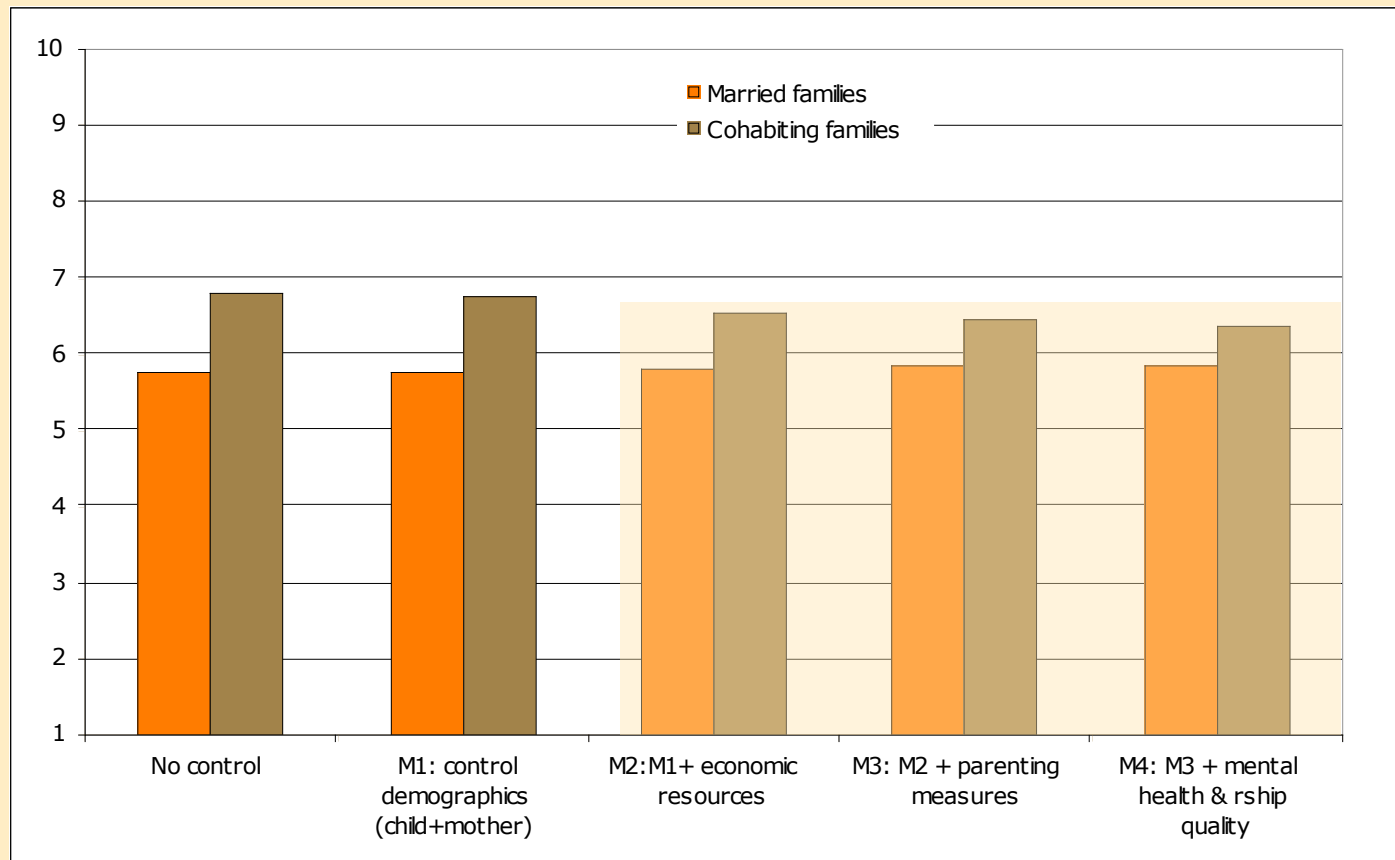
# Children's well-being: Predicted scores of social/emotional outcome index



# Children's well-being: Predicted scores of learning outcome index



# Children's well-being: Predicted scores of social & emotional development – teachers' assessment



**Two groups of children:**  
**Does the gap change over time?**



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# Family stability, wave 1 – wave 2

Wave 2	Wave 1	
	Married families	Cohabiting families
Still together	89.2	74.9
Step families	0.1	0.5
Sole parent	<b>3.2</b>	<b>8.7</b>
Attrition	<b>7.5</b>	<b>15.8</b>
Total	100.0	99.9
N	3578	379



# Children's well-being measures

## ● Social/emotional development

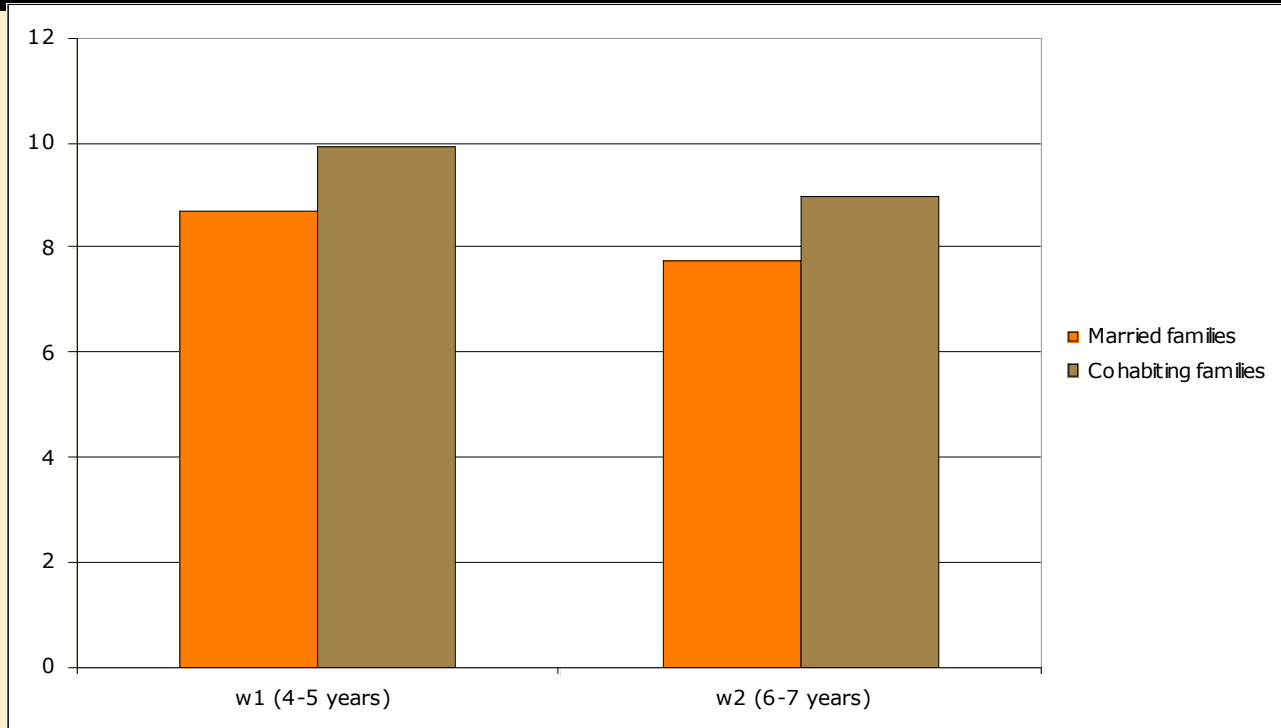
- ◆ Parent's assessment
- ◆ Score: 0–40, higher score=worse outcome, comparable across w1 & w2

## ● Cognitive development

- ◆ Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) score : higher score=better receptive language
- ◆ Score comparable across w1 & w2 (w1: mean=64, sd=8; w2: raw score calibrated on w1, mean=74, sd=5)



# Children living with 2 bio parents at both w1 & w2: mean score of social & emotional development –parents' assessment



Mean change in score between waves

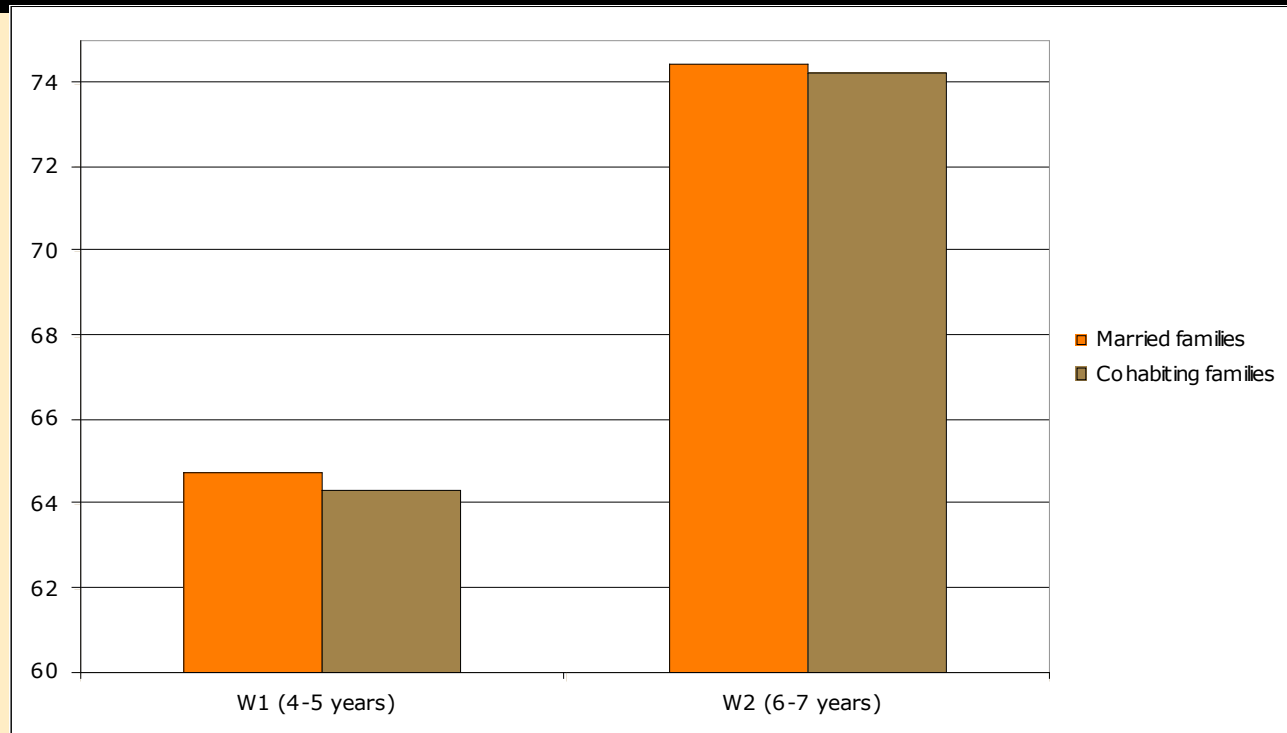
- Married families=0.96
- Cohabiting families=0.96



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# Children living with 2 bio parents at both w1 & w2: Mean score PPVT



Mean change in score between waves

- Married families=9.63
- Cohabiting families=9.95



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# Summary

- **Children in cohabiting families fare less well compared with those in married families:**
  - ◆ physical development
  - ◆ social/emotional development
  - ◆ learning
- **Cohabiting families:**
  - ◆ lower socio-economic status (mothers less educated or in paid work, families more likely to experience financial difficulties & in tight financial situation)



# Summary (*continued*)

- **Cohabiting families:**
  - ◆ lower parental resources
    - parenting practices less favourable to child development (e.g. more hostile parenting, less consistency)
    - poorer relationship quality between parents
- **The differences in well-being of children in two types of families:**
  - ◆ largely attributed to differences in parental characteristics, economic resources & parental resources,



# Summary (*continued*)

- Cohabiting families were less stable compared with married families
- When parents remained together, the gap in children's well-being between two types of families did not appear to increase or decline

## Question:

**Do children benefit if their cohabiting parents get married?**

- Wave 3 data will throw light on this

