



Married Life

The First Seven Years

A survey of married life and couples in the first seven years of marriage in Ireland





7 Years

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Foreword

“The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of the community of marriage and family.”

Vatican II

ACCORD (Catholic Marriage Care Service) is the biggest and most geographically widespread provider of services in support of Marriage and Family in Ireland. With 58 centres countrywide, we deliver over 55,000 client contact hours annually. Our Mission is to respond to the needs of couples preparing for and living out their commitment to Marriage and Family.

The Irish Constitution pledges to protect and recognise the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society and to guard with special care the Institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded.

Since the introduction of divorce in Ireland in 1995, we have seen an increase in the numbers of couples seeking separation and /or divorce. In 2005, over 3,300 couples' divorces were granted by the Circuit and High Courts. However, the good news is that we have also seen more couples (over 20,700 in 2005) deciding to commit to marriage. We therefore felt that this was an appropriate time to look at a number of important issues concerning marriage and family in the 21st Century.



As far as we know no previous in-depth research has been carried out into courtship, co-habitation, relationships, marriage and family and other related family issues. As we listened to couples and learned from them, we saw the value in undertaking a robust and in depth survey into how they met, their relationships developed, their reasons for marrying, family sizes, their overall happiness, satisfaction with marriage/life and the role of the Church and State in supporting them. We would like to express our sincere thanks to each of the 712 married couples who willingly participated in this project.

ACCORD were delighted to commission Amárach whose ethos, professionalism and values were similar to ours – to carry out this ground breaking and highly relevant research. We are certain that there will be further opportunities to expand and develop our findings which identify and explain current trends in regard to marriage and family.

Shay Ellis
National Director
March 2007

Introduction



“Love at first sight is easy to understand; it’s when two people have been looking at each other for a lifetime that it becomes a miracle.”

Amy Bloom

This Report sets out the findings of an innovative and timely research study. Marriage and family life has undergone considerable change in recent years. Much has been written and said about the threats to family life and to the institution of marriage in modern Ireland. Given the crucial importance of marriage and the family to personal happiness, social cohesion and economic welfare it is vital that we understand how marriage is faring in Ireland today.

ACCORD commissioned Amárach Consulting to design and conduct a survey of couples in the first 7 years of marriage (i.e., married – for the first time - between 1999 and 2005 inclusive at the time of the study). A total of 712 couples throughout Ireland – or 1,424 individuals – were surveyed in April and May 2006 using a self-completion questionnaire issued to each spouse. The sample of couples was spread across each year of marriage between years 1 to 7 to give valid sub-samples for each year of marriage. See the note on survey methodology in Appendix 1.

The survey covered all aspects of married life from money to courtship, children to commuting and more besides – and provides insights into the various aspects of married life in Ireland today.

This Report therefore looks at the main findings of the study in relation to:

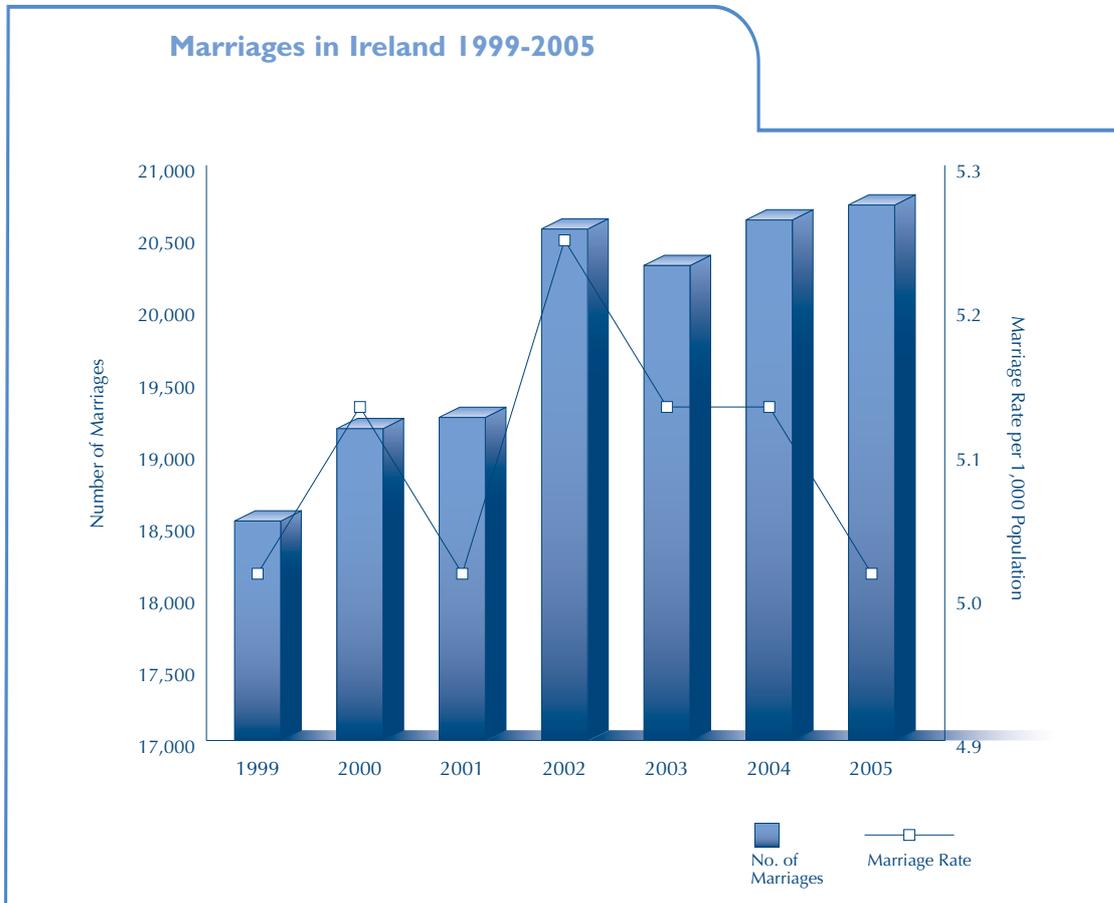
- Getting Married – the development of the relationship before marriage.
- Happiness – measurement of the happiness and satisfaction of couples in the first 7 years.
- Parenting – the challenges and experiences of young parents.
- Family Roles – a look at how couples view their roles in the modern marriage.
- Problem Areas – the pressure points and stresses affecting marriages today, and perceptions of divorce and their own experiences.
- Religion – current practices of modern couples.
- Government – perceptions of family policy and needs.

A Growing Trend

There were nearly 140,000 marriages between 1999 and 2005 inclusive – with the numbers each year reaching levels last seen in the 1980s. The chart opposite shows the trend in the number of marriages each year covered by our study and the marriage rate (i.e., the number of marriages per thousand population).

The marriage rate (which adjusts for a growing population) has actually increased in the past 10 years – suggesting something of a “revival” in marriage relative to the early and mid-1990s when the rate fell to historically low levels. Of course, divorce has also been on the increase over the same

period – with the number of divorces granted, rising from 2,315 in 1999 to 3,391 in 2005. Put another way, there were 8 marriages for every divorce in 1999 compared with 6 marriages for every divorce in 2005.



Our study is – by definition – confined to those who are “still married” and so by definition it excludes those who married between 1999 and 2005, but then separated or divorced. These numbers are likely to be small (as from earlier research most divorcing couples have been married for 10 years or longer). Our sample of married couples nevertheless reflects the 140,000 couples that married in the 7 year period covered in our survey.

Previous Research

We have drawn on a number of studies in preparing for this research project. Three studies in particular provided invaluable insights into issues and methodologies for use in relation to a survey of the kind we undertook. These were:

- 1 “How Was It For You? – Research on the First Year of Marriage”, published by ACCORD, 2001.
- 2 “Time, Sex & Money – The First Five Years of Marriage” by the Centre for Marriage & the Family, Creighton University, USA, 2000.
- 3 “Unhappy Marriages: Does Counselling Help?” – published by ACCORD, 2002.

The first of these studies examined the experiences of 77 people in Ireland of their first year of marriage including attendance at marriage preparation courses. The second comprised a postal survey of 947 couples in the first five years of their marriage throughout the United States. For other literature used to inform this study, see Appendix 2. The final study covered over 3,000 clients at pre-counselling, over 800 clients at the end of counselling and 405 clients at the post-counselling stage six months later.

This current study is the first of its kind to our knowledge, in that it features a sample of couples in the first 7 years of marriage, with separate questionnaires completed by each spouse. We hope therefore that the methodology and findings will inspire others to conduct similar studies in other countries to provide comparative insights.

Portrait of a Marriage

The average age of participants in our survey was just under 32 years. Almost three quarters were aged between 26 and 35 years.

The majority completed their full-time education at the end of 2nd Level - particularly those married 5-7 years. However, those in their first year of marriage in our survey (i.e., married in 2005) were substantially more likely to have finished their full-time education at the 3rd Level undergraduate or 3rd Level post graduate stages.

Over two thirds of interviewees were working full-time – falling from 76% of those in year 1 of their marriage to 58% of those in year 7.

In terms of social class, the majority of interviewees were in the AB social class (58%) and (24%) in social classes C1/C2. This indicates that our sample was predominantly “middle class” in profile. Other national surveys by Amárach in relation to social values about marriage and the family indicate that the opinions reported in this study are nevertheless reflective of the wider population of married adults.



Part 1 Getting Married

“All weddings are similar, but every marriage is different.” John Berger



Part I: Getting Married

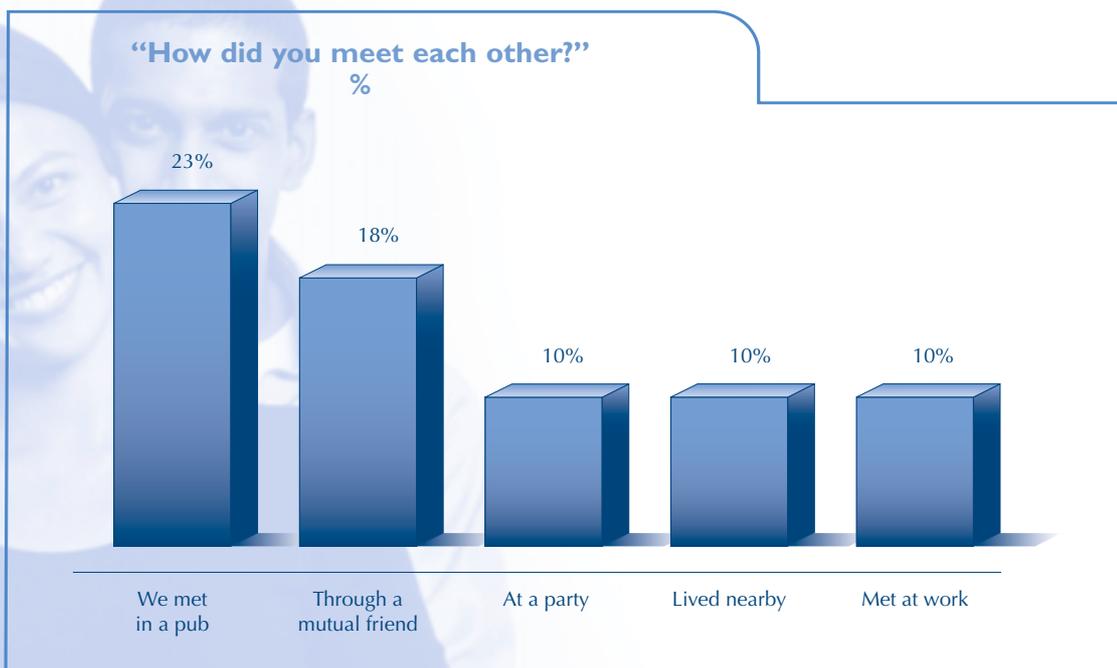
We noted in the Introduction the rise in the numbers of people marrying in Ireland in recent years. Despite occasional claims about the “outdated” nature of marriage as an institution, its popularity remains as strong as ever. Given that getting married was a relatively recent experience for the couples in our survey, we examined their experiences leading up to marriage in some detail, looking for insights into the motivations of young couples to marry in a society which does not necessarily compel them to do so.

The average age at marriage among the couples in our survey was 28 years of age, with men on average two years older than women. Indeed the average age at marriage has risen in recent years – those in their seventh year of marriage in our survey were 27 on average, those marrying in 2005 were 29 on average.

This is an interesting finding in that it supports other indicators of couples delaying certain decisions until later in life, e.g., the rising average age of women giving birth to their first child. Some of the influences may simply be economic (the cost of mortgages etc), or career-related (e.g. women wishing to progress further in their careers before going on maternity leave etc).

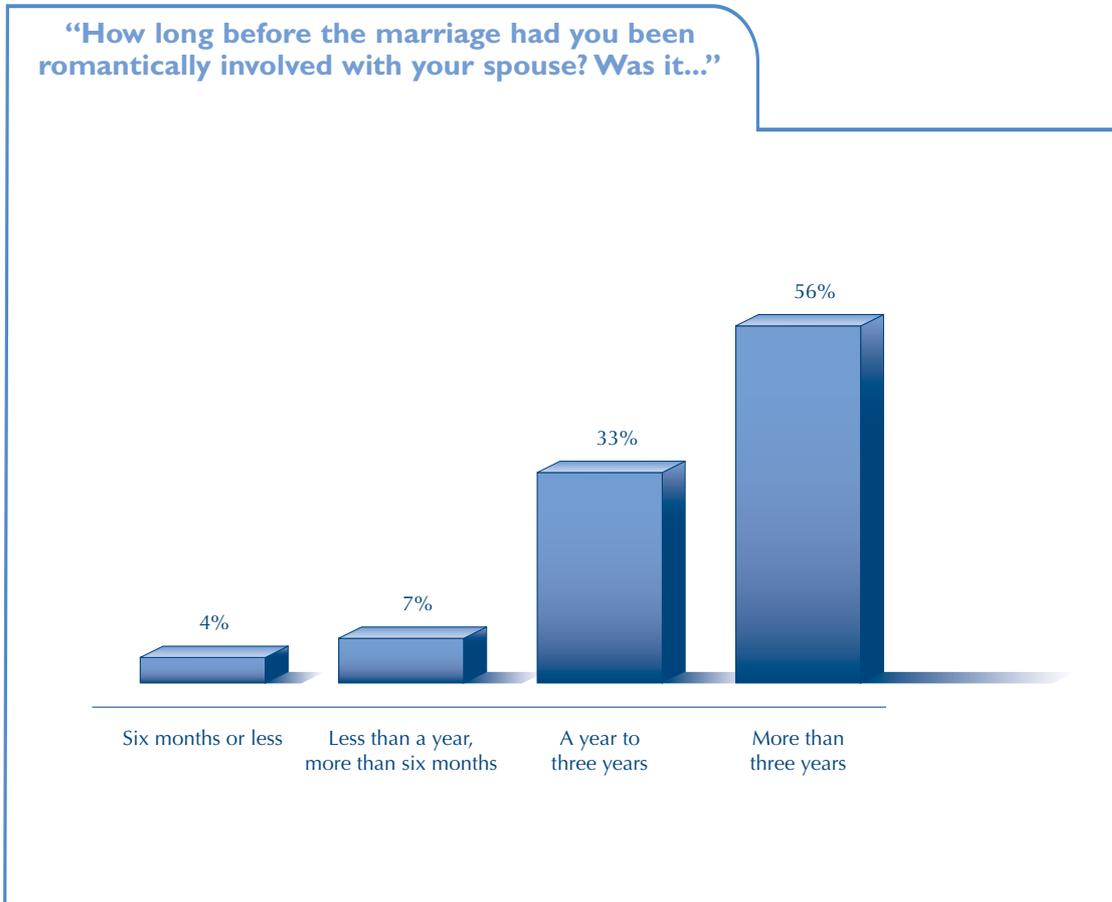
Where It All Started

One constant that does not appear to be changing is the role of the pub in bringing future couples together! Nearly 1 in 4 of the couples we surveyed had met in a pub, while 1 in 5 was introduced by a mutual friend. The chart shows the most common ways of meeting one another:



Few Whirlwinds

The majority of couples were romantically involved with each other for more than three years before they got married – with relatively few “whirlwind romances” as the chart below shows:

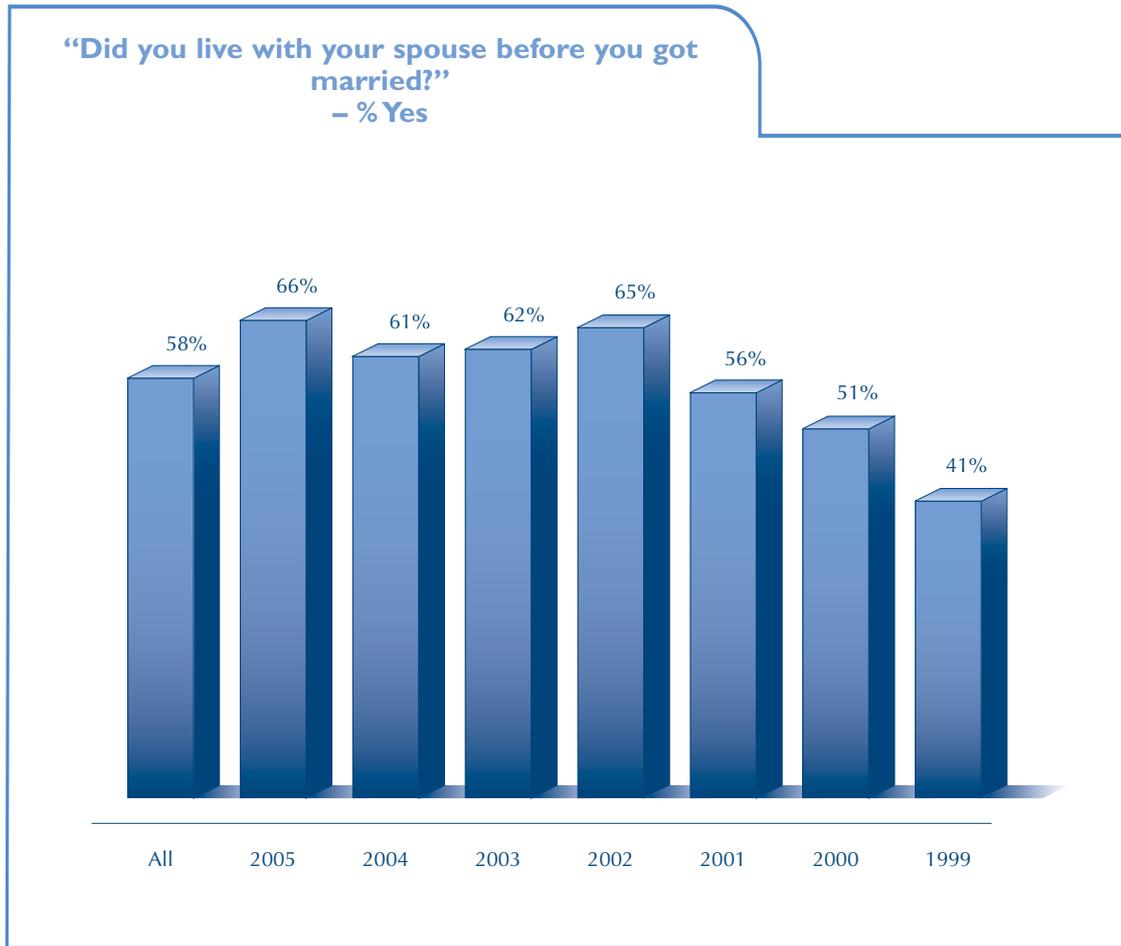


As with age when married, there is some evidence that those more recently married were “going out” for longer on average than others. This again might be related to the economic and social factors referred to above.

Co-Habitation

A major social trend in Ireland in recent decades has been the growing incidence of co-habitation before marriage. Similar trends are evident in other countries, though there are many different explanations as to why this may be occurring.

As our sample only consisted of married couples, we cannot determine what differences if any there might be between couples who started living together at the same time as those we interviewed, but who did not subsequently get married. Nevertheless, it is clear that a majority of couples in our survey co-habited before they got married, and our study would suggest that co-habitation has become an increasingly common step for couples before they marry (66% of couples married in 2005 compared with 41% of couples married in 1999):



On average, couples are co-habiting for 3 years before they marry, or for most of the period they are romantically involved before they marry. Once again, those most recently married in our survey were likely to have co-habited longer than those marrying several years earlier.

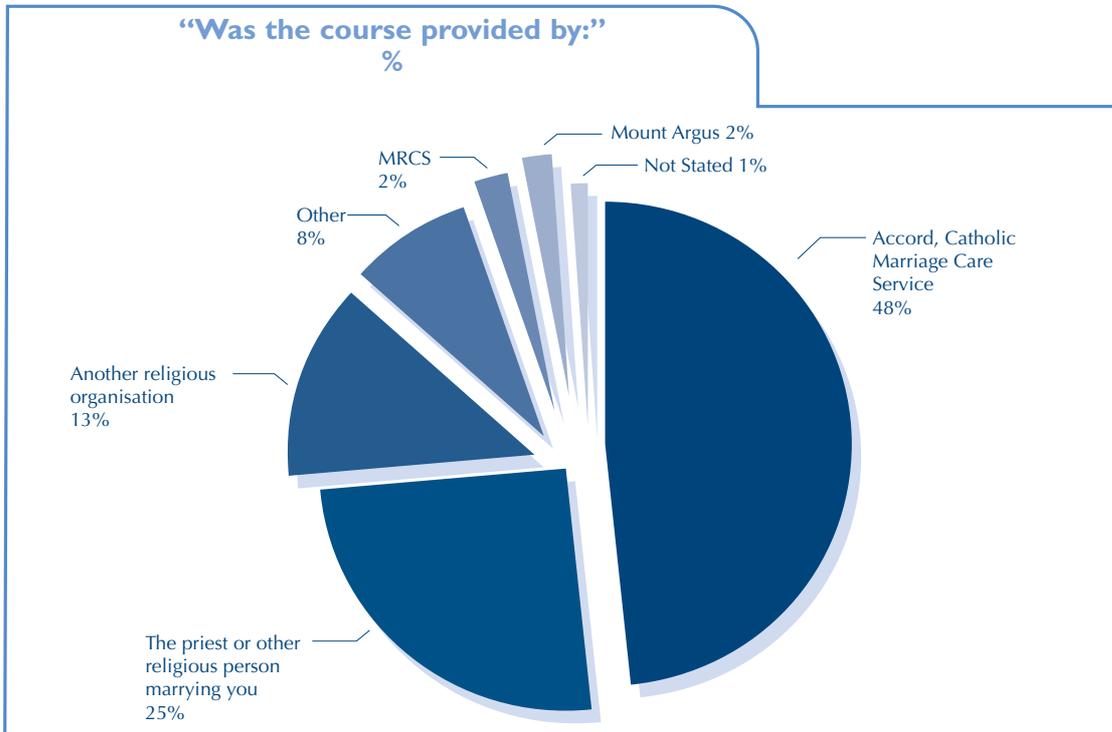
For a substantial minority of couples (47%), living together before they got married was seen as a prelude to getting married, with equal proportions of males and females agreeing they had decided to marry when they started living together. Indeed, co-habitation may well be a form of “deferred marriage”, perhaps because couples are waiting until they can afford the wedding itself, or because they want to save a deposit for a house etc.

We did not explore this in our survey, but we did ask why couples got married (given the high proportion co-habiting beforehand). In fact, the main reason is love, and the desire to commit to a permanent relationship signifying their love for one another. Marriage is therefore still a “romantic” decision rather than a “calculated” one, with for example only 3% of couples saying they married in order to have children.

Marriage Preparation

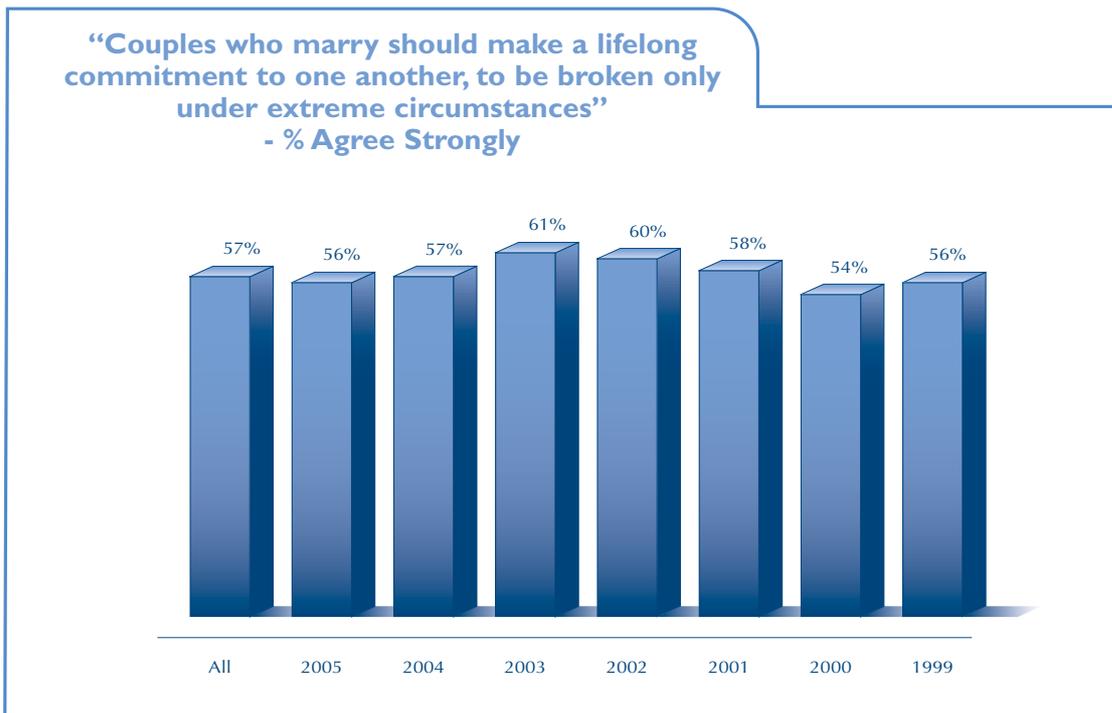
Despite living together for a number of years, the vast majority of couples getting married in the past 7 years attended a marriage preparation course before getting married. Over 6 in 10 couples attended such a course, which is consistent across the couples surveyed.

A large minority of those attending a marriage preparation course attended courses organised by ACCORD, with 1 in 4 receiving preparation directly from the priest or religious person marrying them:



Married for Life?

The nature of the commitment couples undertake when getting married is quite clear. They recognise that marriage is a lifelong commitment, and most couples in our survey “agree strongly” with the concept that “marriage is for life”, whether married for 1 year or 7 years as illustrated in the chart below:



There is a broadly similar level of agreement among husbands in the survey as among wives, with 55% of men agreeing strongly with the ideal of “lifelong commitment” compared with 59% of women. Therein is a key difference between the experience of co-habitation and that of marriage – with only marriage providing a clear signal to the couple themselves and to the wider community that they are committed to one another for the rest of their lives.

A Popular Choice

Marriage today is as popular as ever – despite all the changes affecting family life and social and religious values in recent years. Though a majority of couples now appear to co-habit before they get married, clearly large numbers want to make a more significant permanent statement about their love for one another by getting married.

Of course, it is important to remember that our survey only comprised those couples who got married for the first time and were still married at the time of the study. Our analysis does not therefore allow us to comment more widely on the impact of co-habitation on the permanency of couples’ relationships as we have excluded those who co-habited before marrying and then subsequently divorced, as well as those who did not marry and remained either as a co-habiting couple or who subsequently parted.



Part 2 Relationships

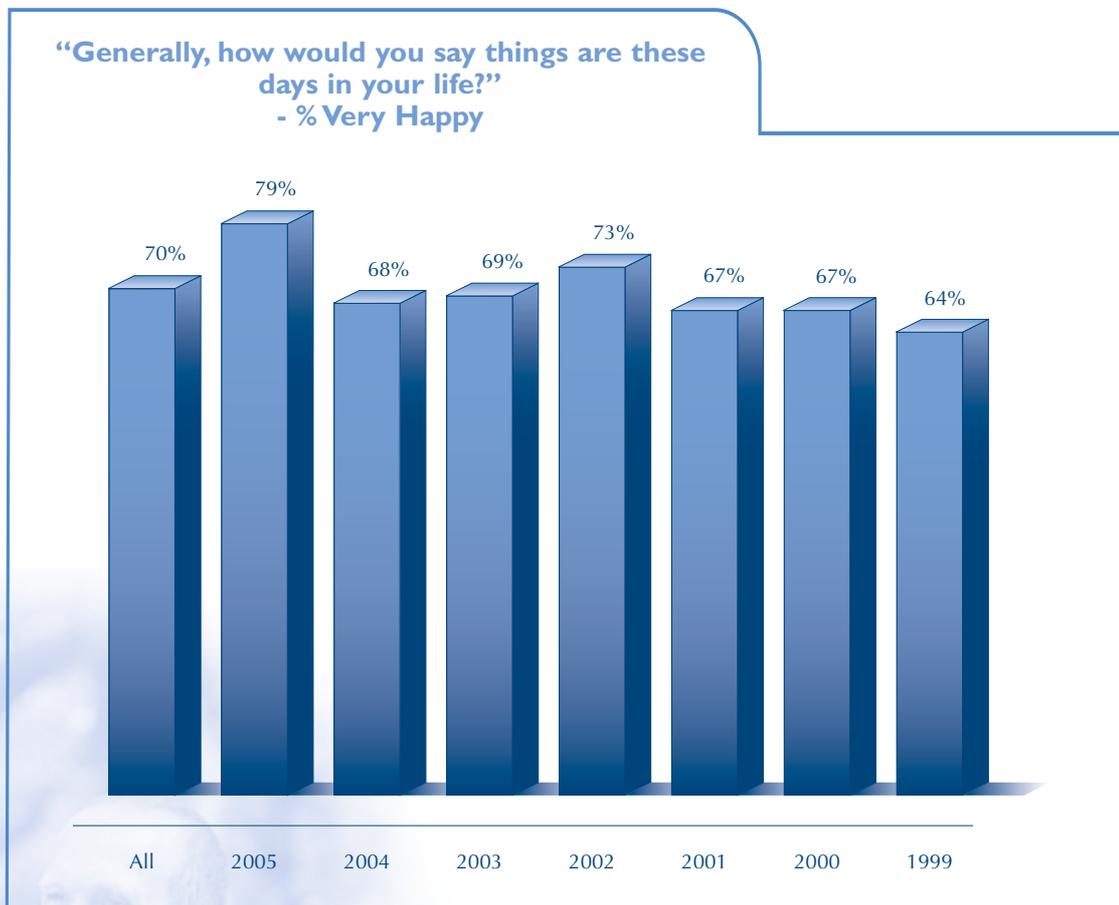
“A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.” Mignon McLaughlin



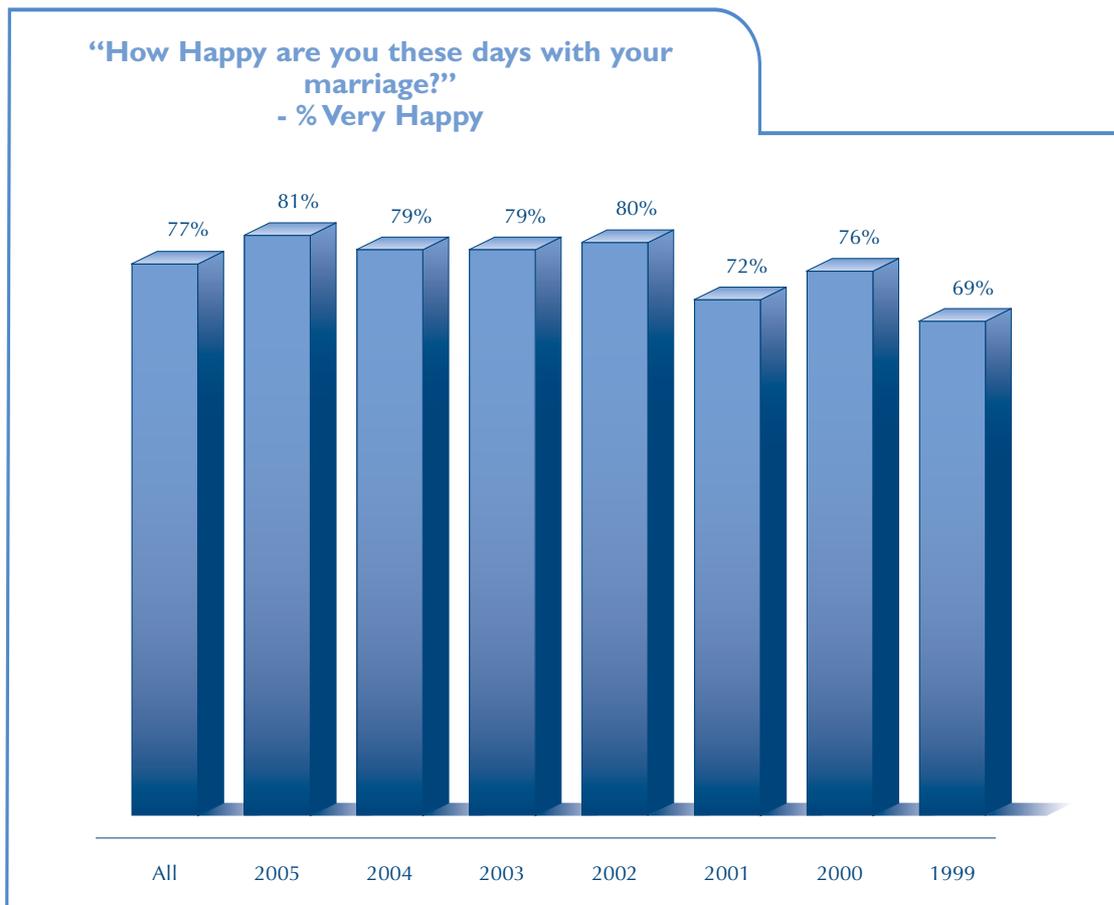
Part 2: Relationships

There is little evidence of a “7 year itch” in our research. Indeed, the “honeymoon period” appears to extend throughout the first 7 years. The vast majority of men and women are “very happy” with their life in general, women slightly more than men (72% versus 68%).

There appears to be some slight decline in reported happiness by length of marriage, as illustrated below:



In addition to being happy, most people in our survey tend to be very satisfied with “life in general” (70% of all those we surveyed). Indeed, we should not be surprised to discover that those who are very happy with their lives are very happy with their marriage, though the proportion does fall gradually between those in their first year of marriage and those in their seventh year of marriage – as illustrated in the next chart:



That said, even among those in the seventh year of their marriage, nearly 7 in 10 were very happy, and only 1% were “unhappy”, with the balance “pretty happy”. Again, getting older is more likely to account for much of the differences across the length of time married if the literature on this subject is any guide. Generally our research finds that happiness and satisfaction in relation to marriage are also strongly correlated – supporting similar findings in other studies into the role of marriage in subjective well-being.

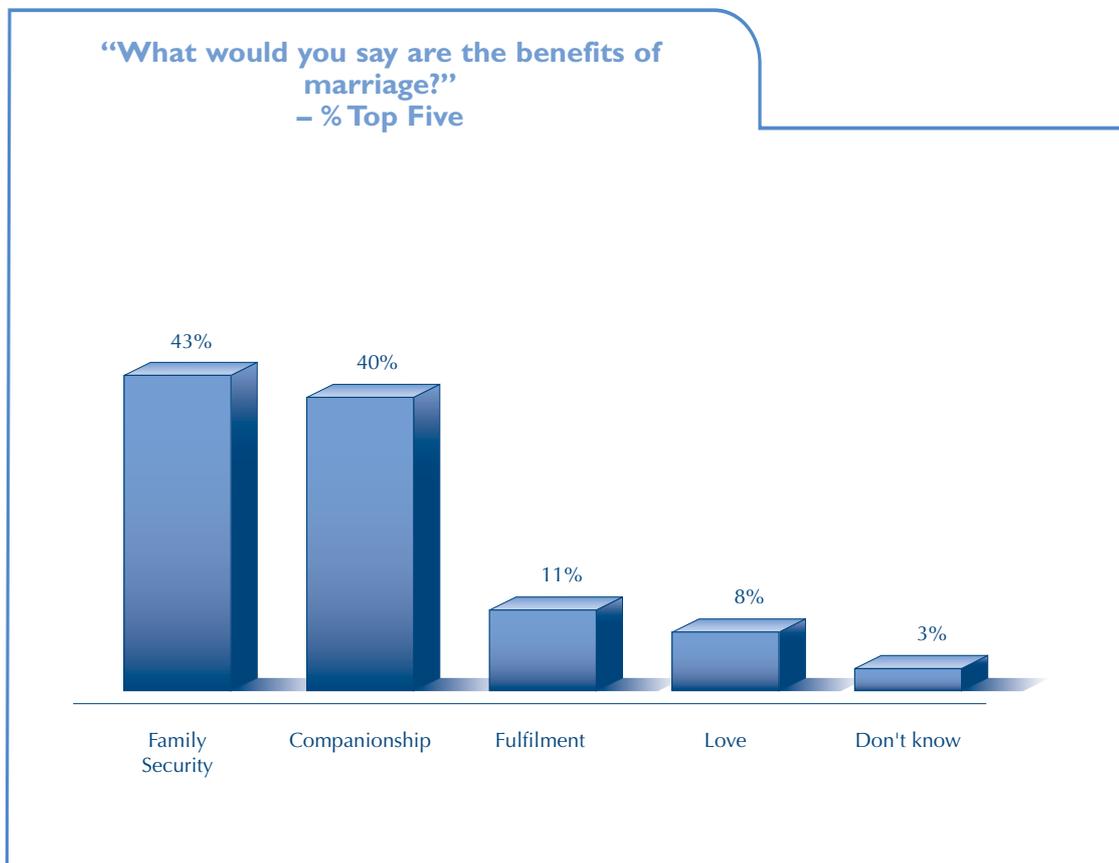
Mind the Gap

Indeed, one indication of the level of satisfaction of couples with their marriage is to see how close their actual marriage is to their “ideal marriage”. We addressed this issue by asking each respondent to look at a scale where 1 is very far from ideal and 10 is exactly their ideal. They were then asked to say how close to (or far from) the ideal, their marriage was. It might surprise some to learn that 3 in 10 couples give their marriage a perfect 10 out of 10! All told, some 4 in 10 couples give their marriage an 8, 9 or 10 out of 10 – suggesting again a high level of satisfaction with their marriages. On the other hand, some 1 in 20 couples gave a score of 0-4 out of 10 for their marriages versus their ideal marriage. There is no pattern, however, in relation to length of marriage and the “gap” between reality and ideal.

Word of Mouth

Another indicator of marital satisfaction is the willingness of couples to recommend marriage to another couple intending to get married. In the more mundane research world of customer satisfaction measurement, one of the truest and most accurate measures of a person's true satisfaction with a product or service is their willingness to recommend it to others. It is therefore reassuring to find that the overwhelming majority (86%) would indeed recommend marriage to another couple intending to marry. The level of recommendation is high for both males and females, and across all age groups.

Given the strong sense of contentment and happiness found in our survey, we sought insights into what people consider to be the main benefits of marriage – benefits that are clearly so conducive to well-being. The chart below lists the “top five” answers to this question, with family security and companionship coming at the top: though some 3% were unsure of any benefits!



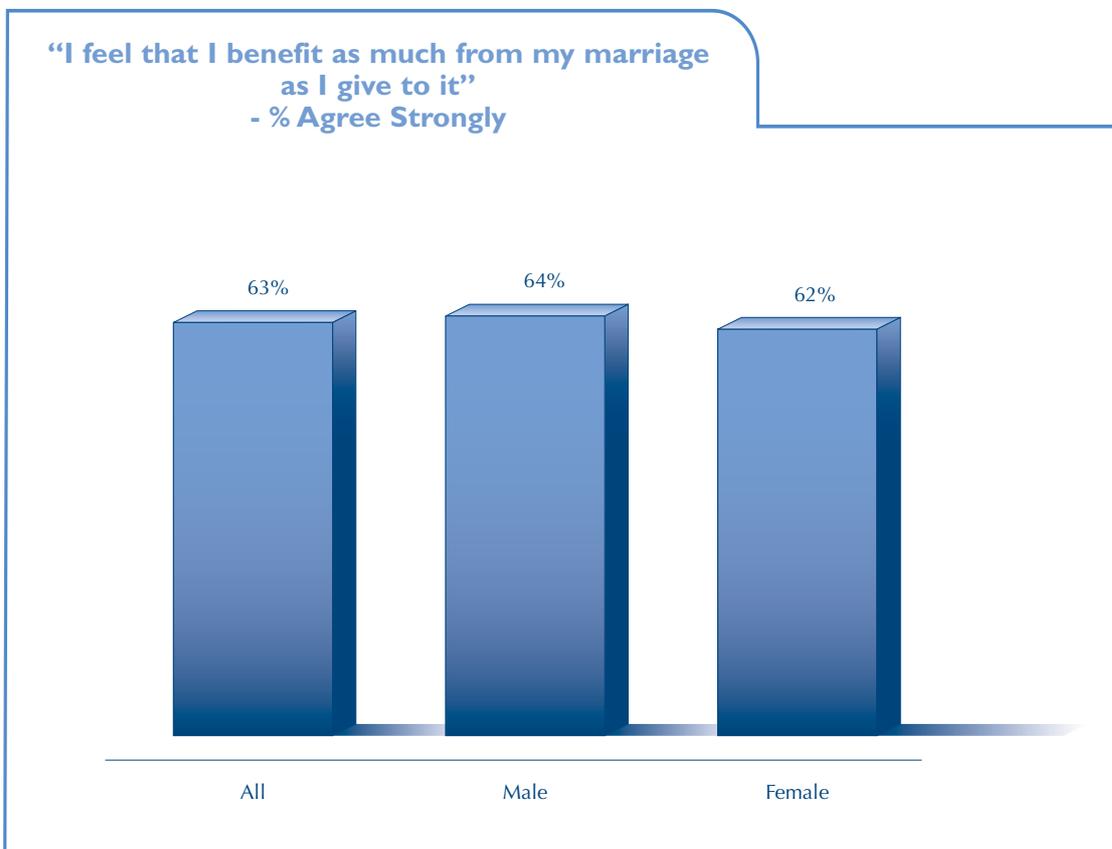
Men and women have broadly the same order of benefits of marriage, and the order remains fairly constant by year of marriage. Fundamentally then, marriage is deemed to provide security, companionship, fulfilment and love for both spouses, again in line with traditional perceptions of the benefits of and motivations for marriage.

A Positive Experience

Marriage is probably the most important relationship people will experience in their adult lives. Our survey gives us an opportunity to “take the temperature” of relationships among Ireland’s newly weds and recently weds, to see how well they were coping with their marital adventure.

One important starting point in assessing relationships is the degree of compatibility between couples. By and large, couples appear to be very compatible in terms of their values and goals. Some 90% of all couples agree that they have the same basic goals as one another in life, while 94% agree that they have the same basic values. These proportions change little by length of marriage in our survey.

Equally it is important nowadays that couples feel that theirs is a two-way relationship, in which both spouses benefit. In fact the majority of men and women feel that they benefit as much from their marriage as they give to it:



This holds true across the first 7 years of marriage as well, as does the theme of equality between spouses in terms of their say in their marriage on “the things that matter” – 70% of couples agree strongly that this is the case.

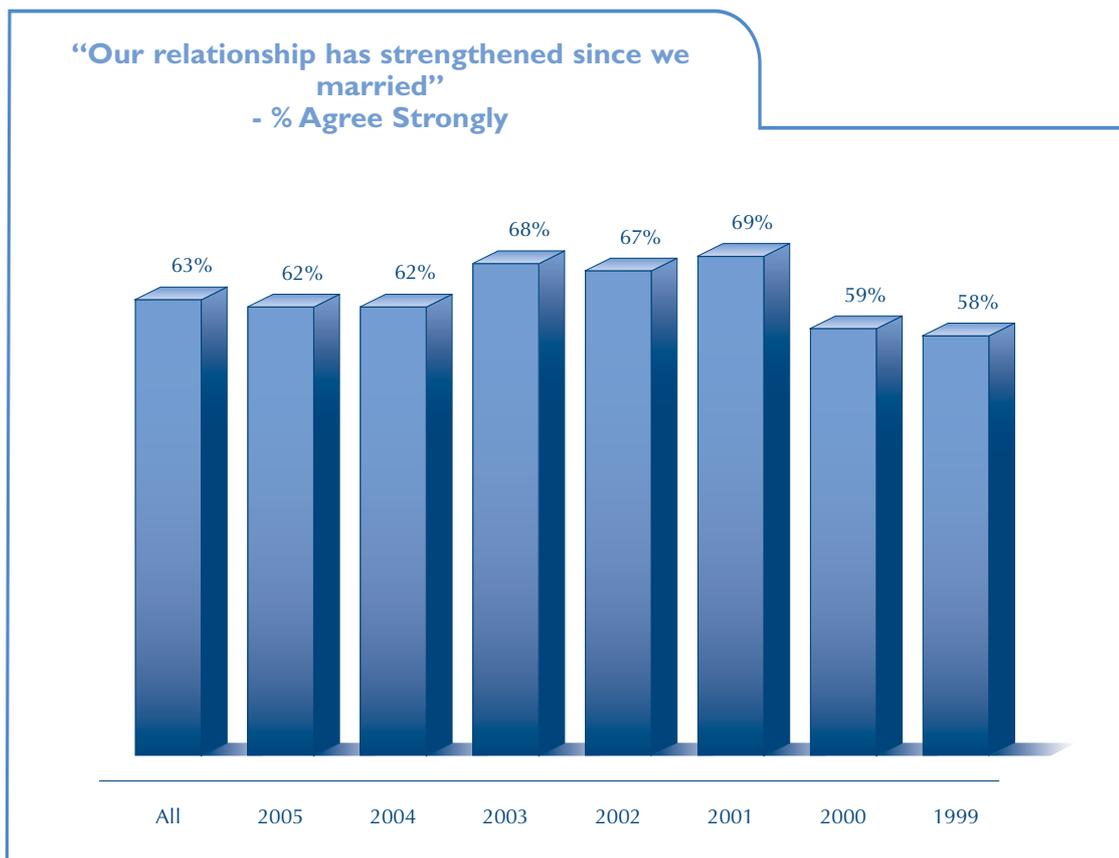
It follows that a key factor in this pattern of equitable relationships between spouses is that of communications. Here again, the evidence from our survey suggests that couples are indeed “willing to discuss issues with one another when raised”, with 60% agreeing strongly that their spouse is open to such communications. This generally holds true across the first 7 years, though there is a significant lessening in the level of “strongly agree” by years 6 and 7 compared with earlier years. The proportion strongly agreeing among couples in their sixth or seventh year still exceeds half of all couples.

Listening skills play an important part in facilitating good communications between married couples, so it is encouraging to note a key finding from our survey that again there is strong gender similarity in relation to the perception that their spouse does listen to them. Over half (55%) of all couples agree strongly that he or she feels “my spouse listens to me”. Again this remains broadly consistent by duration of marriage.

Smiles & Laughter

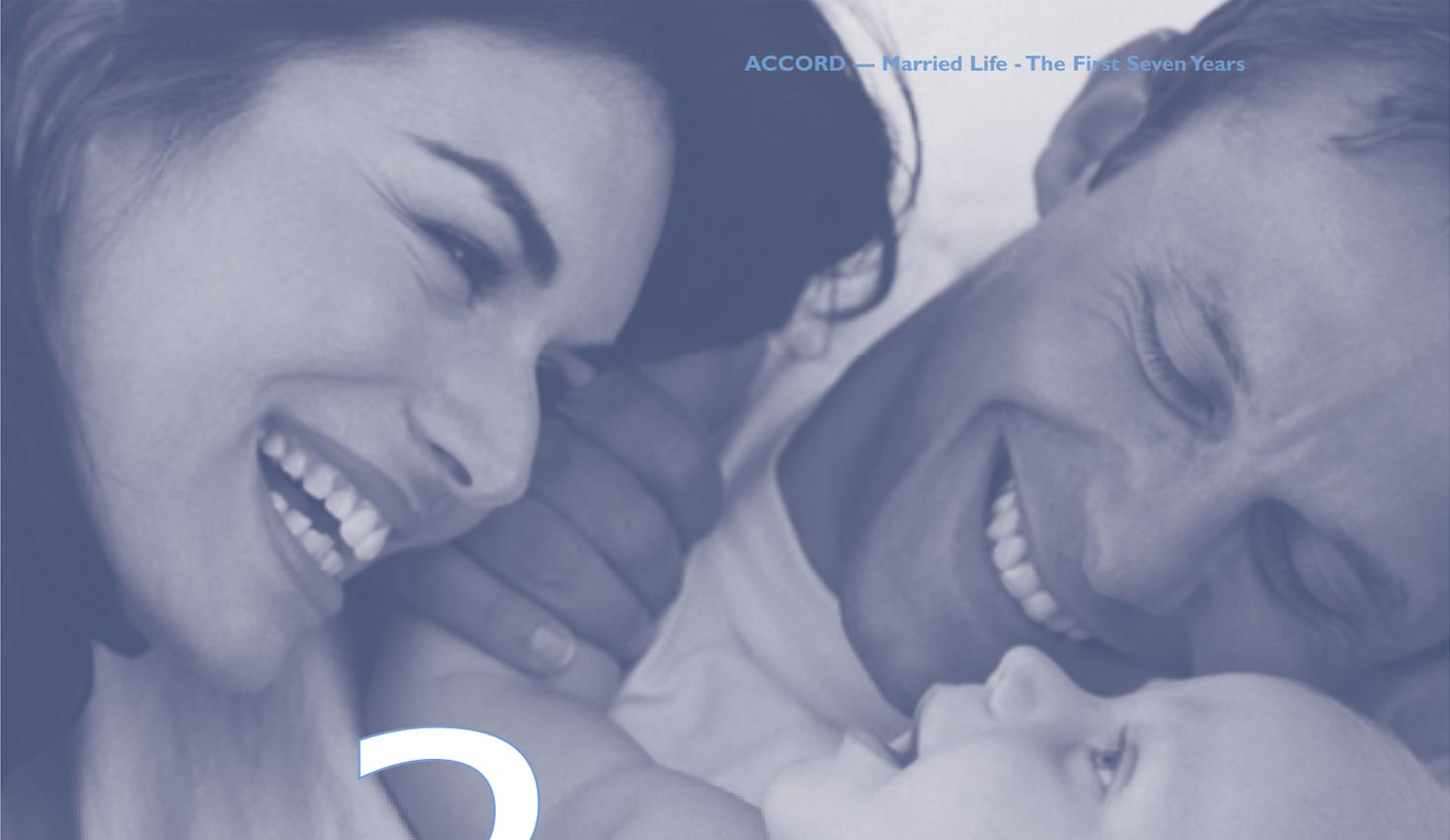
Of course, not all discussions and conversations have to be “heavy” or “earnest”, it is important to see the funny side of things as well from time-to-time, and indeed, one statement that got the highest level of agreement from the couples we surveyed was that which asked if their “spouse often makes me smile and laugh”. Nearly three quarters (73%) of couples agree strongly that their spouse does indeed often make them smile and laugh – testimony indeed to the health and compatibility of the marriages in our study.

There appears then to be strong relational bonds between the couples in our survey, moreover, there is some evidence that relationships may be improving over the lifetime of the marriage rather than simply “depleting” the relational capital accumulated before the marriage and in the very earliest stages. Some 6 out of 10 couples agree that their relationship has indeed strengthened – from the first and second years through to the sixth and seventh years.



Strong Foundations

The picture of modern marriages in Ireland that emerges from these findings is indeed a positive one. Though all couples face challenges at some stage, the overall impression from our study is one of happy and fulfilling relationships in the traditional sense; coupled with a more contemporary pattern of equality between spouses as partners in their marriage.



Part 3 Parenting

“You have a lifetime to work, but children are only young once.” Polish Proverb



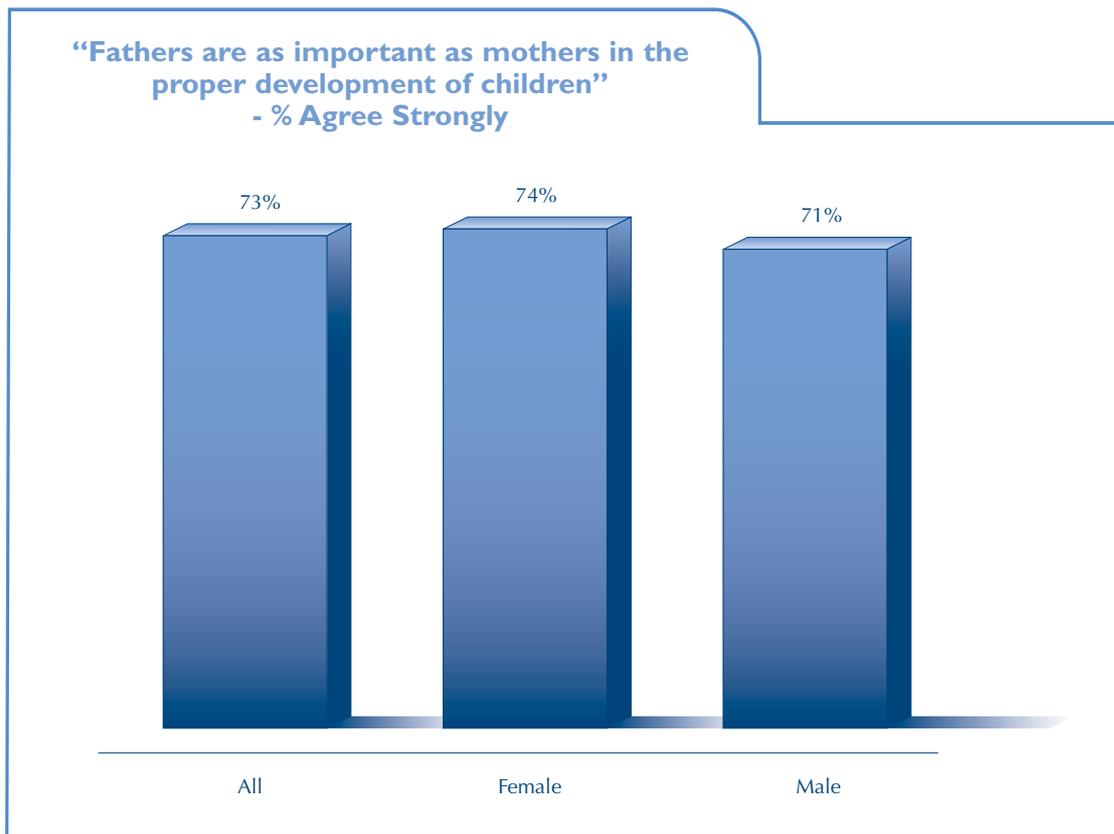
Part 3: Parenting

Family life has changed considerably in recent years, driven by trends such as the increasing proportion of married women in the workforce as well as smaller family sizes by comparison with previous generations. Between 1997 and 2006, the number of married women in employment rose from 291,000 to 416,000. Put another way, the proportion of married women actively participating in the workforce rose from 45% to 52% over the same period – passing the significant 50% threshold for the first time in early 2005 (data from the *Central Statistics Office’s Quarterly National Household Survey*).

Despite all this change, however, our research points to a more traditional perception of family life and parental roles among young married couples. For example, married couples are quite traditional in their perceptions of the “ideal family” in relation to raising children. The majority of men and women (53% and 55% respectively) in our survey “agree strongly” with the statement that “all things being equal, it is better for children to be raised in a household that has a married mother and father”. Indeed, a further 3 in 10 of both sexes “agree slightly” with this statement.

There is very little difference by age in relation to these attitudes – and it suggests that modern married couples still see the raising of children by their natural mother and father as the ideal arrangement. Indeed, much has been said in recent times about the role of fathers in raising children. According to our own study, the overwhelming majority of men and women “agree strongly” that fathers have as important a role as mothers in raising children as illustrated in the chart on opposite page.





For the Children

Another key issue in relation to marriage is having and raising children. The majority of couples (54%) in our survey agree that people should marry before they have children – though only a minority (32%) “agree strongly”. Younger couples, without children, are less likely to agree than older couples with children.

On balance, general attitudes towards marriage among those couples we surveyed tend to be fairly traditional in relation to the nature of marriage, having children and parenting. Though much has changed in terms of family structures and child raising patterns (e.g., there were 130,000 births outside marriage between 1999 and 2005 – nearly a third of total births), married couples generally perceive marriage as the optimum way to have and raise children, with both parents vital to their children’s well-being.

Family Patterns

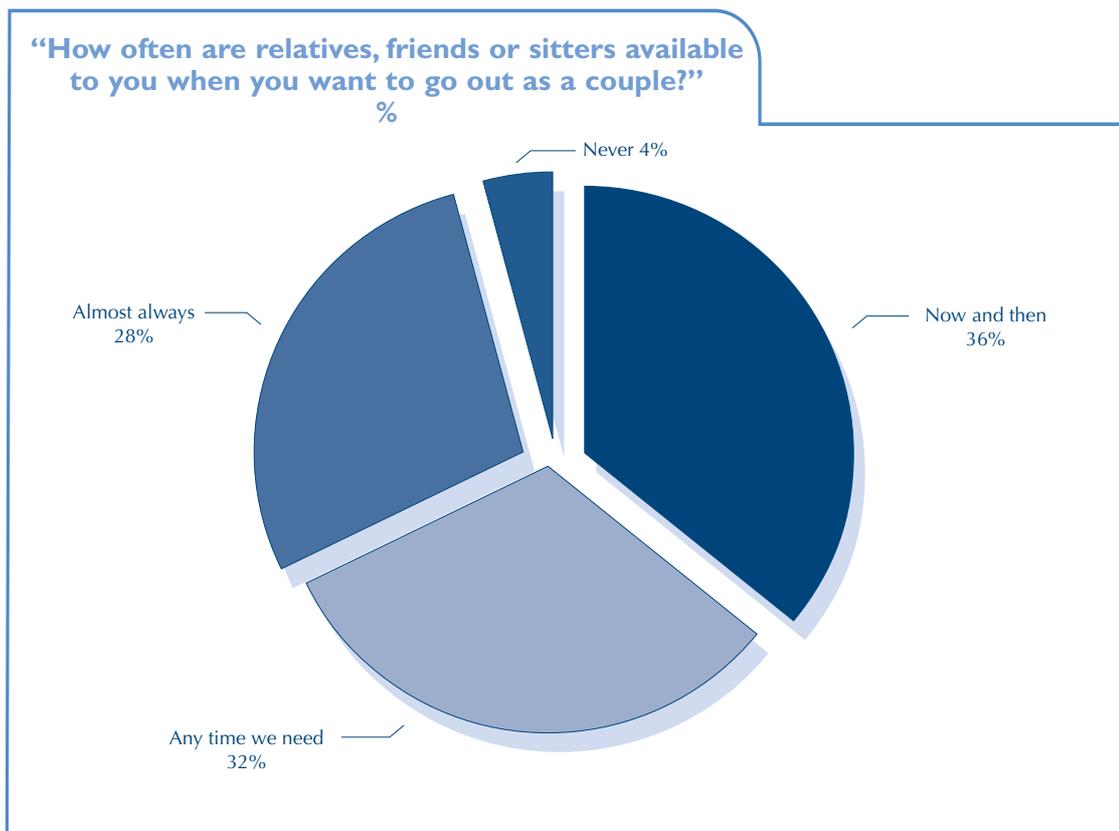
Having children tends to be the most significant “milestone” in most marriages. Our next chart illustrates the main stages in relation to parenting in couples in their first 7 years of marriage. Some couples already have children from their own or other relationships, so we find that a small minority in their first year of marriage actually have two or more children – though the majority at this stage have none.

By the third year of the marriage, the majority of couples have had their first or subsequent child. Then by the fifth year of marriage, a majority have had their second or subsequent child. Nearly 3 in 10 of the couples we surveyed had three or more children by their seventh year of marriage.

Though the overwhelming majority of children are born after marriage (93% of the children of the couples we interviewed), a small minority are born either before the marriage or indeed have a different parent (or parents in the case of adoption) to the married couple themselves.

Couple Time

A major issue for all couples with young children is that of support from sources other than the spouses themselves. It is reassuring therefore to find in our study that fewer than 1 in 20 of the couples we spoke to are faced with a situation where there are no relatives, friends or sitters available to them when they want to go out as a couple. In fact, a third of couples have such support any time they need, and another 3 in 10 almost always when they need it. Indeed much the same pattern prevails across the first 7 years of marriage for parents.



Given such prevalence of alternative support, we find that couples do tend to take advantage of this availability to spend some time together just by themselves as a couple. However, the incidence of such time together does tend to decline as the number of children increases, with only 3 in 10 of those in their seventh year of marriage (with children) taking time out together once a week or more often, versus almost half of those in their first year of marriage with children.

Parenting undoubtedly presents one of the biggest challenges to married couples in the early years of their marriage. Though few get married specifically to have children (as noted earlier), having children is nevertheless a strongly desired outcome of being married. Despite concerns about young parents being isolated in new estates as they move away from family and friends to buy houses they can afford, it is reassuring to see that most young couples with children have relatively easy access to the kind of child care and support they need to spend a little time together as a couple, away from the children.



Part 4 Problem Areas

“Marriage is not just spiritual communion, it is also remembering to take out the trash.” Joyce Brothers



Part 4: Problem Areas

The picture that emerges so far from our research is generally a very positive one, and quite encouraging about the state of marriage and young family life in Ireland nowadays. But of course all relationships have their difficult patches, and in the case of some marriages those difficulties can end up in the divorce courts. We therefore used the opportunity of our survey to examine in detail the main problem areas facing couples in the first 7 years of marriage – looking for pointers to the pitfalls to be avoided in order to avoid bigger problems later on.

Big Rows about Small Things

Most couples in our survey have had disagreements – indeed, the majority experience arguments that can sometimes blow up into big rows. The proportion of couples who “never or almost never” experience rows does tend to fall towards years 6 and 7, though “frequent rows” does not appear to increase significantly.

Problem Areas

There are many different factors that can contribute to problems in marriages. We asked each spouse to separately score each listed area in terms of how problematic it has been in their marriage on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all problematic to 10 where it is very problematic. The main problem areas (scoring 8, 9, or 10 out of 10) tend to be those relating to work life balance, both in terms of careers versus parenting responsibilities; and in terms of juggling their needs as couples versus their priorities as parents.

Financial pressures also come through as one of the top problem areas. We note, the proportion of couples for whom any of these issues are significant problems (8-10 out of 10) is actually quite low. The incidence of problems among couples (some of whom could have identified more than one) in our survey is as follows:

- 8% of couples indicate “balancing job and family life” as problematic,
- 8% indicate “balancing parenting and couple time” as problematic,
- 8% indicate “financial pressures”,
- 5% indicate “division of household tasks”, and
- 5% indicate “relations with parents or in-laws” as problematic.

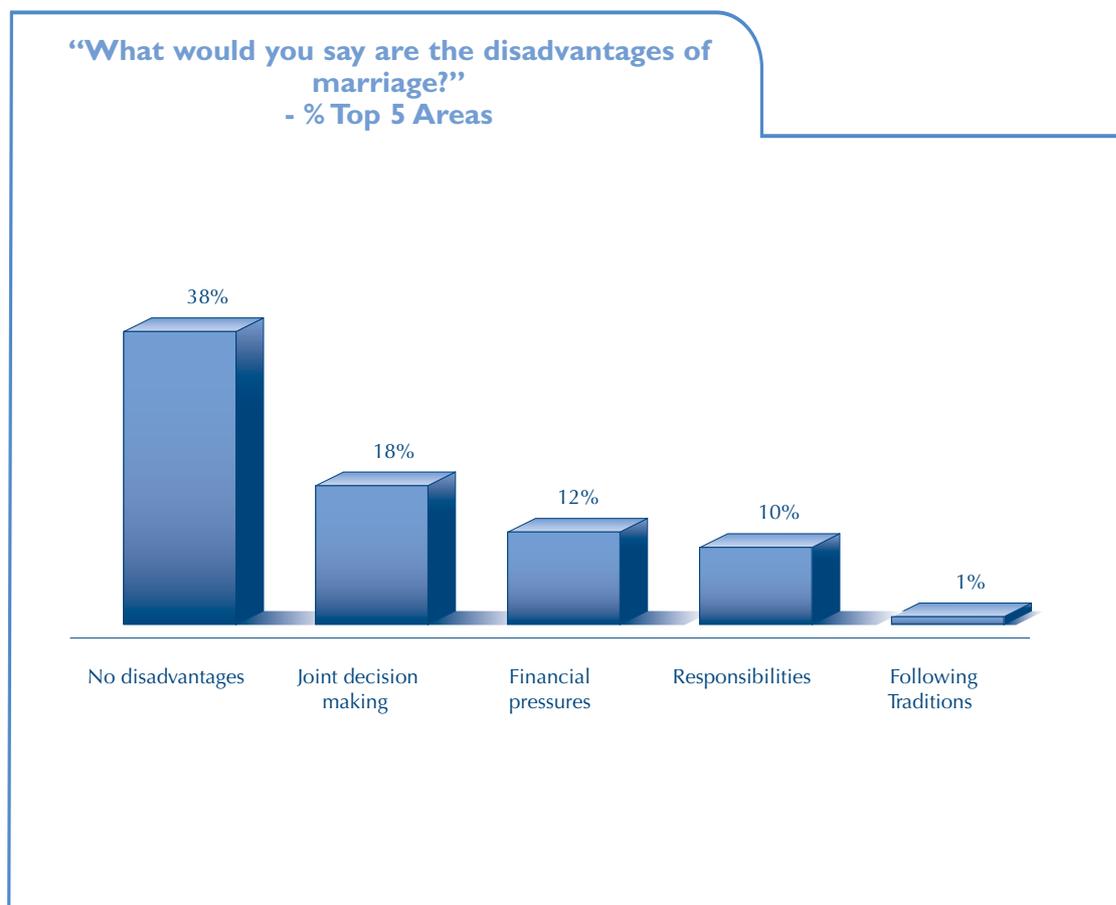
Other areas which tend to be less problematic in the first 7 years include:

- Fertility issues (3%).
- Sexual issues (3%).
- Deciding to have children (3%).
- Drug or alcohol abuse (1%).
- Ill-health (1%).
- Infidelity (1%).

There are almost no significant differences by gender in relation to these problem areas among the couples we surveyed, nor any consistent pattern in relation to the duration of marriage.

Major Disadvantages

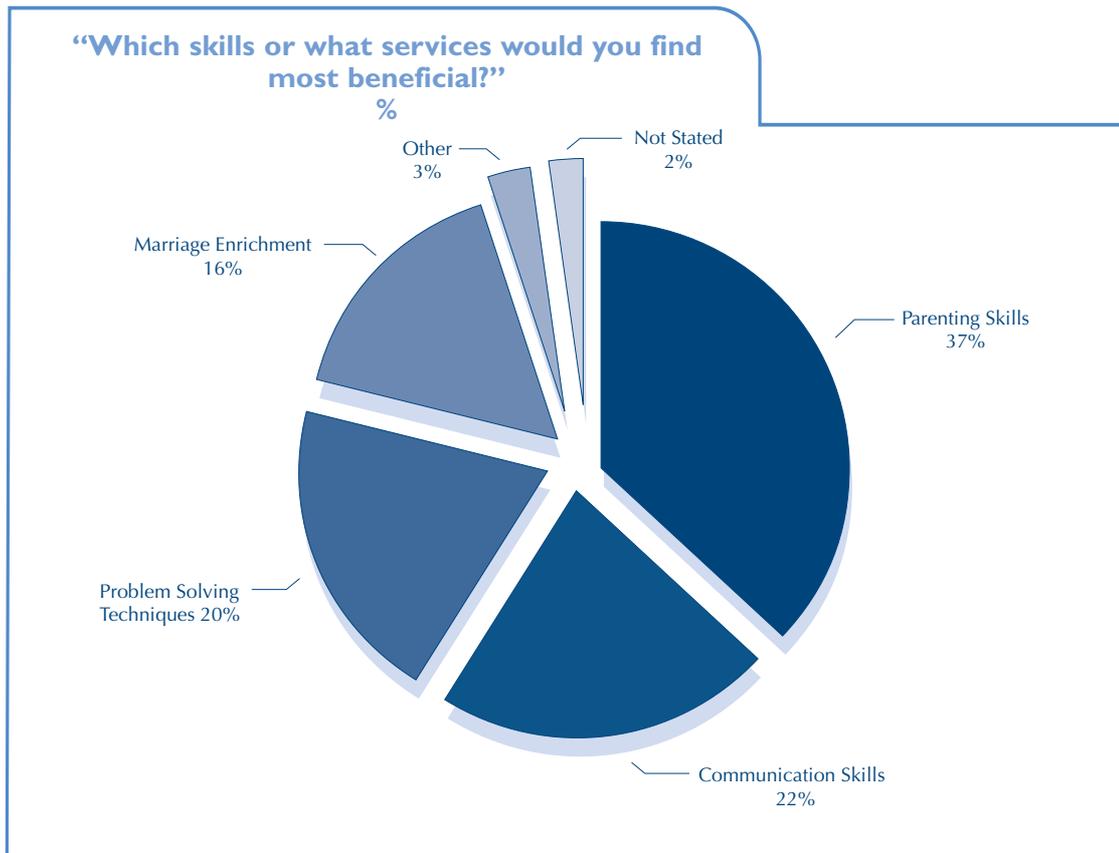
We probed in an open ended question as to what the couples we surveyed felt were the disadvantages of marriage. For a large minority, there were no problems that they could perceive – though this did fall off somewhat from the first year of marriage to the seventh. Issues in relation to joint decision making were identified as the main problem, followed at some distance by financial pressures, these latter issues tended in turn to be highest among those with young children.



In Need of Advice

A sizeable minority (31%) of couples are of the view that their marriage would benefit from professional advice and support to equip them for some of the challenges and problems they face, though that said, most couples do not feel they need such support – even in the sixth and seventh years of marriage.

For those 3 in 10, who feel professional advice and support would help, parenting skills easily tops the poll of skills or services they would find most beneficial – followed by communications and problem solving skills.



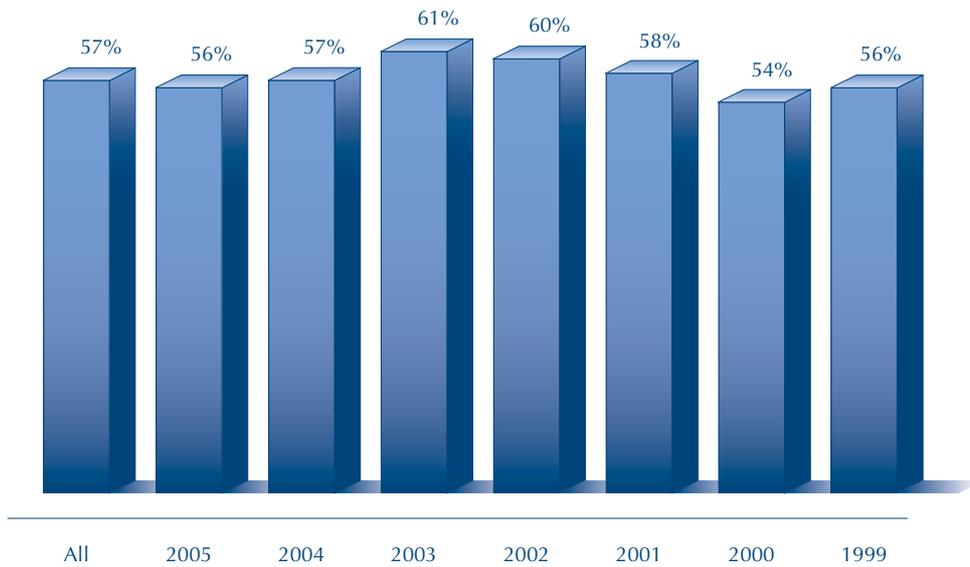
Divorce

In extreme cases, marital problems can lead to marital breakdown – and subsequently to divorce. Married couples are aware of this scenario, and our study explored their own feelings and experiences in relation to divorce – not least because of the rising incidence of divorce referred to in Part I.

The nature of our study meant, by definition, that we only spoke to couples that were not divorced. Of course, the vast majority of marriages do not end in divorce – so to that extent, the couples we surveyed are typical enough of married couples. Nevertheless, regular media coverage in relation to break-ups and divorce does mean that all married couples are reminded regularly of one potential outcome for their marriage – especially where unresolved problems are present.

Couples are of the view that “marriage is for life” and that marital break-up is something that could or should only arise in extreme circumstances. Such views remain consistent over the first 7 years – and by other demographic factors such as age and gender.

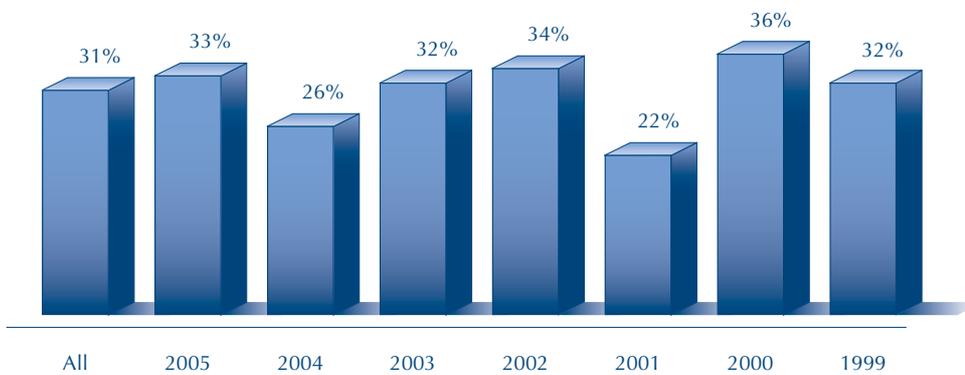
“Couples who marry should make a life long commitment to one another, to be broken only under extreme circumstances”
 - % Agree Strongly



As we saw in earlier sections, couples are generally happy with their married lives and inclined to rate their marriages very highly. They are more hesitant, however, to attribute the same degree of happiness to other couples, even those they know.

The majority of couples agree that “most married couples I know have happy, healthy marriages”. About 3 in 10 agree strongly, while almost half “agree slightly”.

“Most married couples I know, have happy, healthy marriages”
 - % Agree Strongly



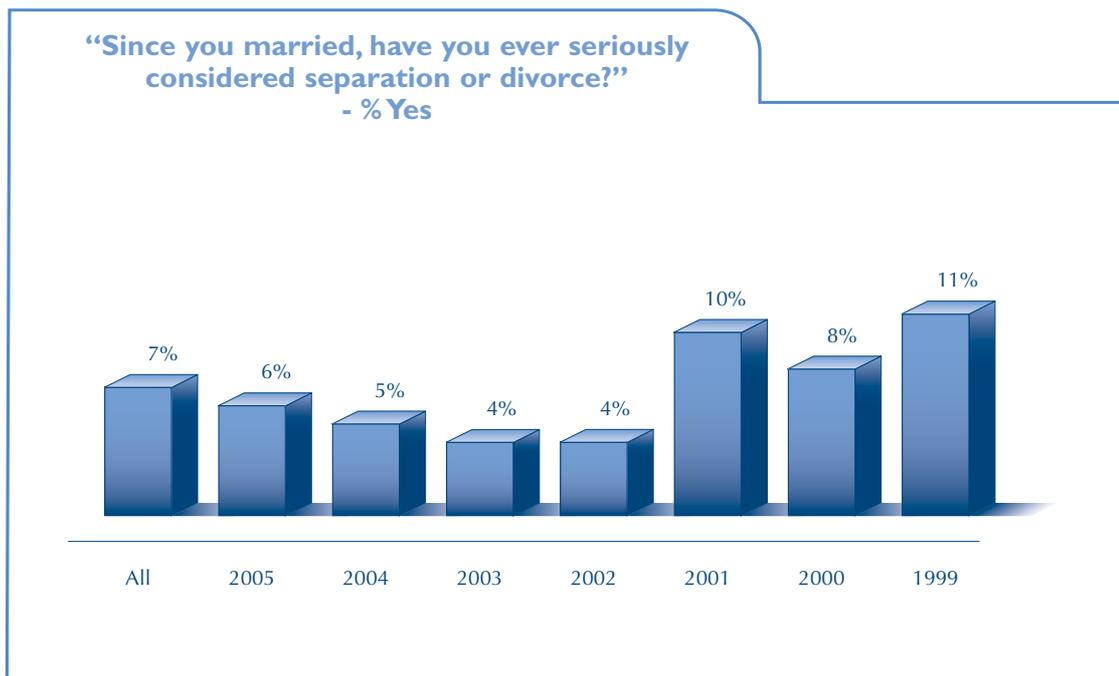
Generally, people marrying for the first time tend to do so at a stage in their lives when many of their friends are also getting married. So each has a “cohort” of married couples that they know, whom they can “benchmark” themselves against. So it is again reassuring to a degree that - broadly speaking – the proportions agreeing strongly about other married couples they know remains fairly consistent by duration of marriage.

Same Again?

Further confirming the generally positive perception of their own marriages, almost all (98%) of the men and women we interviewed about their marriages agreed that they would marry the same person over again – a strong endorsement indeed! Not surprisingly perhaps, when we probe further and ask about their future intentions, again almost all (98%) of the couples we spoke to in the first 7 years of marriage intend to remain married to the same person for the rest of their lives. As with the question reported in the previous section about willingness to “recommend marriage” to a couple intending to get married, these findings do provide a very strong indication of the true nature of the marriages of the couples we interviewed.

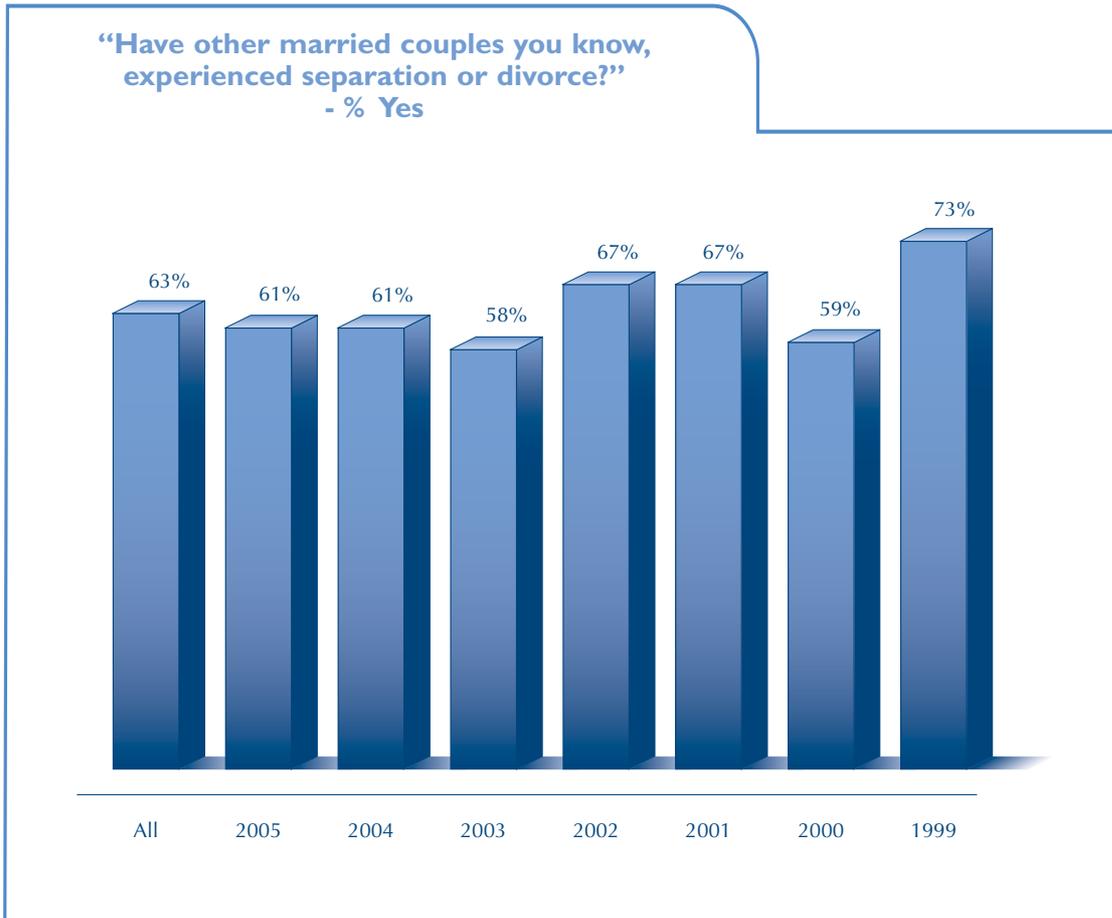
Breaking Up

A more direct measure of “marital vulnerability” perhaps is that relating to whether either spouse has seriously considered separation or divorce – though only a minority have, it does rise slightly in later years:



There are no gender differences in relation to this consideration, though there is an age difference, with 13% of 41-50 year olds having considered separation or divorce.

Perhaps more disturbing is the awareness among the couples we spoke to of separation or divorce affecting other couples they know – 6 out of 10 of the couples we interviewed did indeed know such couples, rising to nearly three quarters of those married 7 years.



Seeking Help

For those facing marital issues, counselling is an option they can turn to. Indeed, some 3% of those we surveyed had wanted to seek counselling, either as individuals or as couples. There were no gender differences in this regard. Moreover, the incidence of considering counselling rises slightly across the 7 years of marriage – to 5% of couples married 7 years.

Considering counselling is one thing – going to a counsellor is another. Again, a low proportion of the couples in our survey had been to a counsellor either individually (1%) or as a couple (3%).

Of course, couples – individually or together – do not have to go to counsellors to discuss their issues. Most (52%) turn to a friend for support and advice in situations – both men and women. Family or other relatives tend to come second (29%) in terms of the network of support that couples or spouses individually will turn to for support with marital issues.

A Problem for Some

Our research into the first 7 years of marriage in Ireland, suggests that the incidence of marital issues that lead to a desire for or actual advice from counselling is quite small. Indeed, 3% of the adults we spoke to “agreed strongly” that they “felt trapped” in their marriage. Clearly for most couples, their marriages are relationships in which they feel satisfied and engaged, without the need – at present – for professional support or advice.

Of course, divorce is a sad reality for many families in Ireland today. The incidence of divorce in Ireland is still low relative to many other countries, and therefore something most couples surveyed have yet to experience directly or indirectly in their personal lives. This in turn may well heighten the impact of divorce on the wider circles of families and friends of those unfortunate enough to experience divorce. But we can draw encouragement from the findings in this study which suggest that – at least among those in the first 7 years of marriage – the experience of severe marital difficulties remains relatively rare, and the potential for divorce in the future seems equally remote for now.





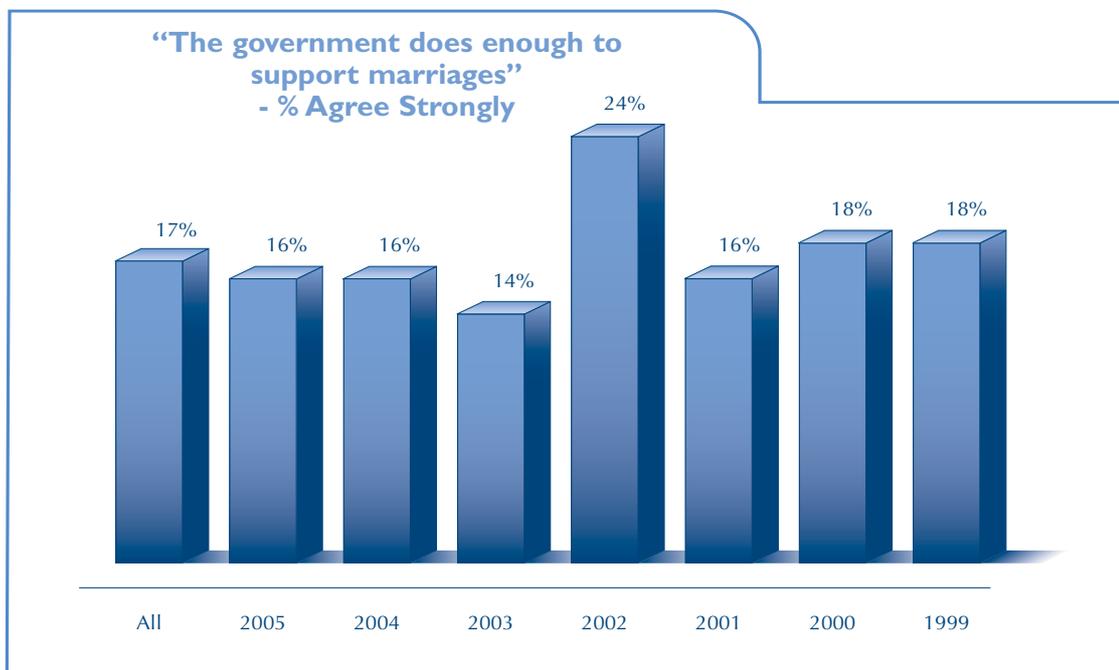
Part 5 Politics & Religion

“The goal in marriage is not to think alike, but to think together.” Robert C. Dodds



Part 5: Politics & Religion

Are there any messages for the Government in this study? By and large, the couples in our survey are quite “self sufficient” in relation to their needs and expectations of the Government. As many agree as disagree with the statement “the Government does enough to support marriage”, with fewer than 1 in 5 (17%) agreeing strongly that it does enough:



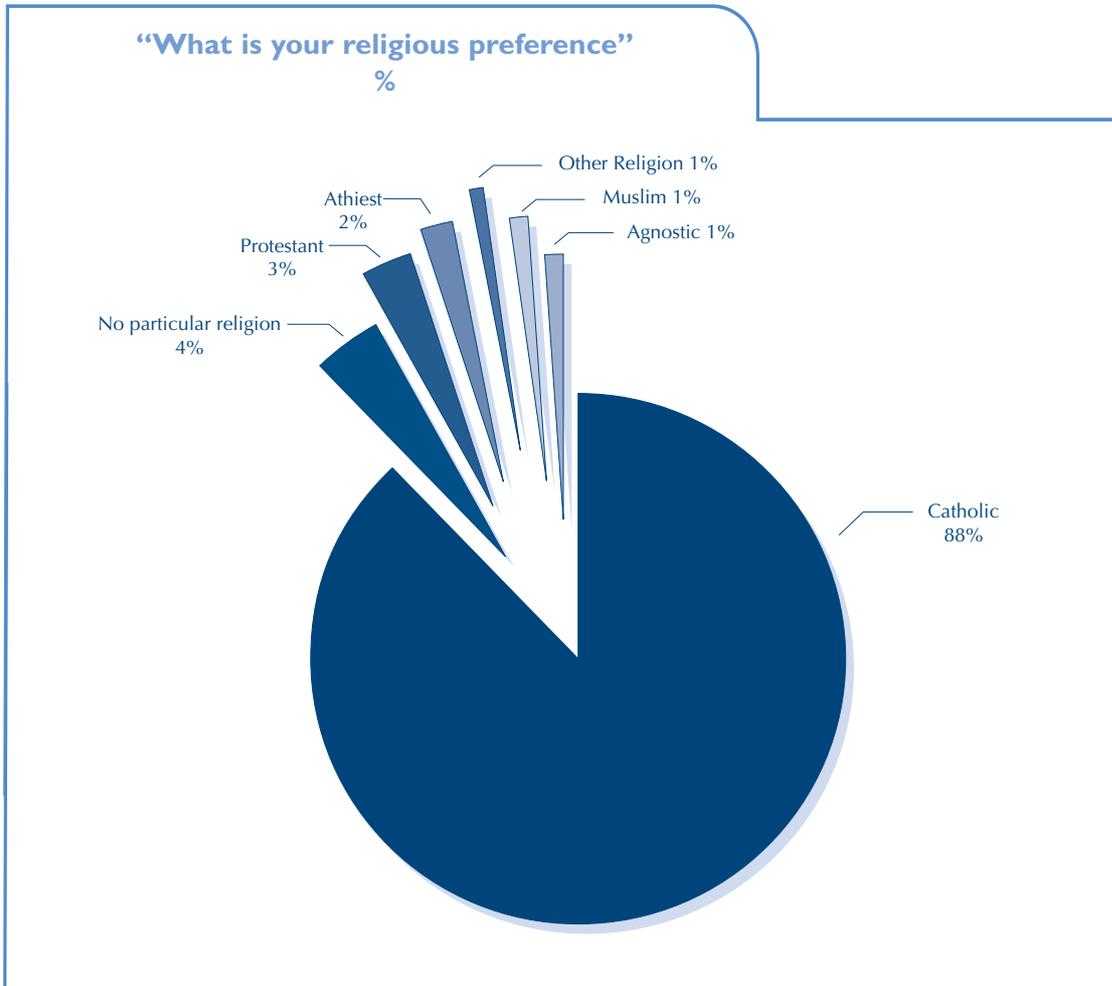
Asked what the Government should do to support marriages like theirs, the main responses were “financial support” (24%), “tax breaks” (13%) and “better childcare” (13%), though a large minority (35%) did not feel they needed any support from Government – emphasising again the finding in relation to the relative “independence” of young families.

It would seem that Ireland’s younger married couples neither ask much nor expect much of politicians and the Government – other than perhaps to be left alone (with as much of their earned income as possible) so they can get on with the job of forming and maintaining the families so vital to society’s and the economy’s well-being.

A Moral Matter?

Despite widespread social and moral changes to Irish society in recent decades, religious values remain quite prevalent in Ireland. The much reported decline in religious practice in Ireland is not unique to our country, nor is the scale of the decline quite as extreme as sometimes reflected in media analysis of the issue.

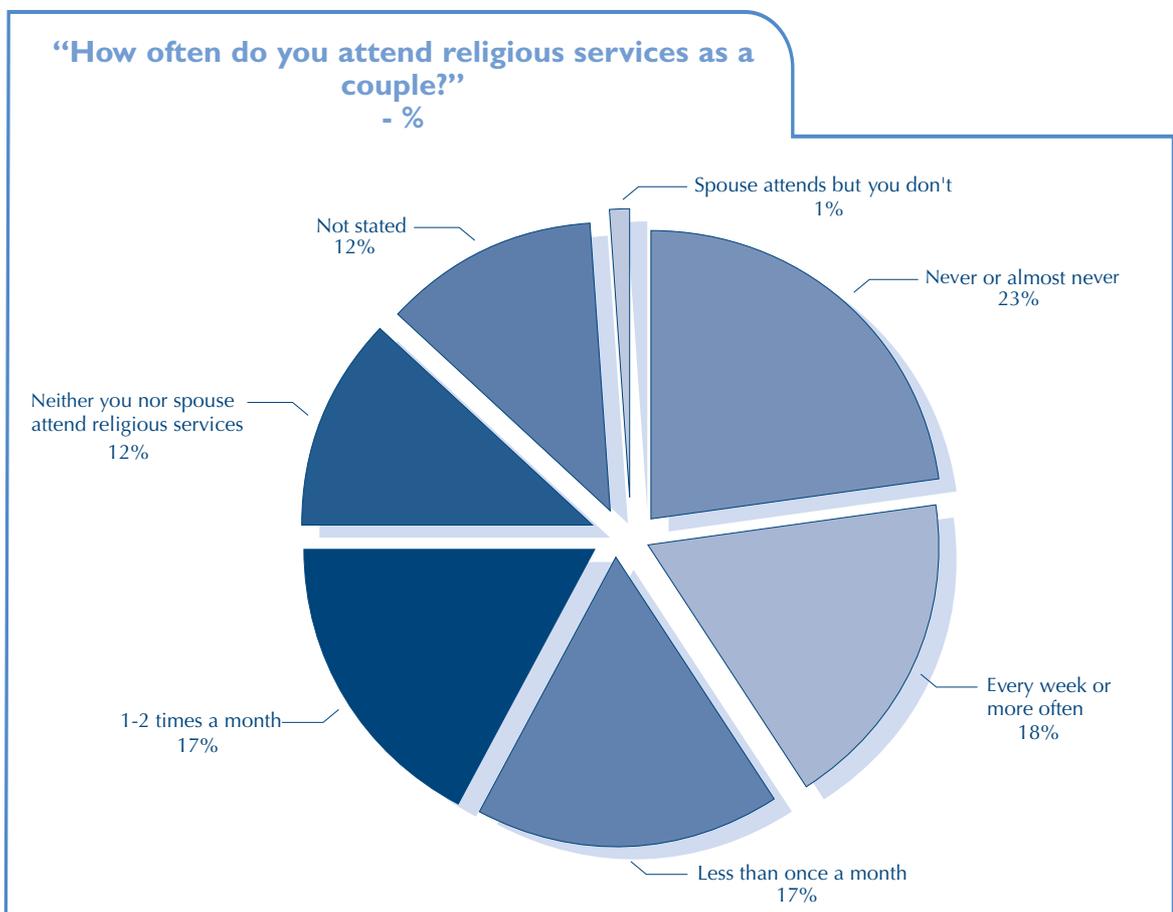
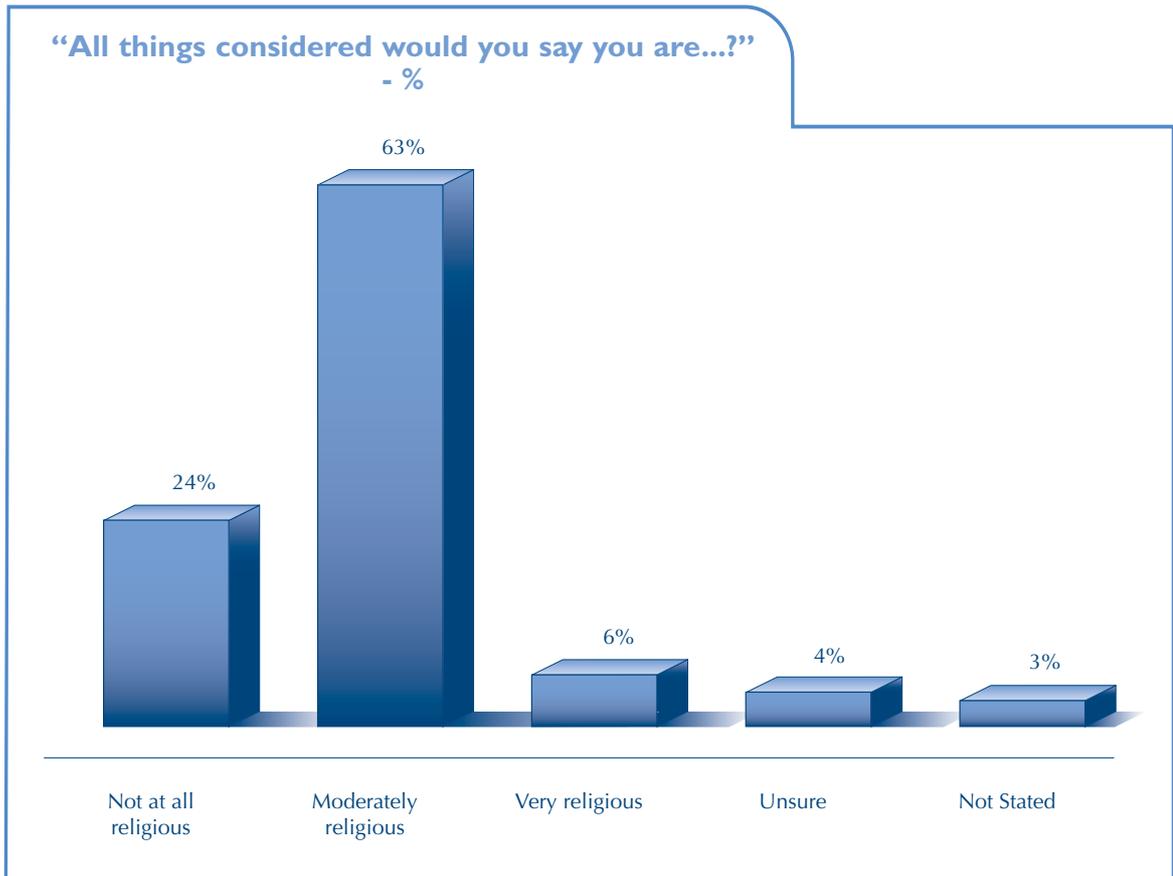
For the couples in our survey, religion does play a part in their lives, values and identities, with just under 9 in 10 describing themselves as Catholic, with the balance made up of other Christians, non-Christians and non-religious as well.



Of course, religious preference does not necessarily mean religious practice, and indeed only 1 in 4 of those surveyed described themselves as “not at all religious”, with two thirds of those surveyed describing themselves as being “moderately religious”.

Men are more likely than women to describe themselves as “not at all religious” – 28% versus 21%. Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) do not attend religious services as a couple – although the majority of men and women do attend a religious service, occasionally or even regularly. (see graph on top of following page).

Religion is also important in terms of parenting and even in relation to choosing schools for children. Nevertheless, our survey shows little stress or conflict arising between couples in relation to religion and their children in the earlier stages of their marriage. (see graph on bottom of following page).



Conclusions

“Happy marriages begin when we marry the ones we love, and they blossom when we love the ones we marry.” Tom Mullen



Conclusions

As we noted in the introduction, this Report truly is an innovative and timely research study. The main findings bode well for the future of marriage and family life in Ireland – despite all the changes that have occurred in recent years.

We can take some comfort from the healthy picture of the first 7 years of married life for contemporary couples in Ireland at the start of the 21st Century. Though all couples experience difficulties and conflicts at different points in their marriage, the evidence from this Report suggests that strong and effective problem solving and coping mechanisms are in place to deal with these issues as they arise.

To summarise the key findings from this study:

- The vast majority of modern married couples understand marriage to be a lifelong commitment for those who make it.
- Marriage is a sufficiently rewarding experience such that 9 out of 10 would recommend it to others.
- The traditional family arrangement of children being raised by both their natural parents is the one preferred by almost all married couples in our survey.
- Co-habitation is an increasingly common occurrence before marriage for couples, and is seen as a stage leading to marriage rather than as an alternative to marriage.
- The incidence of severe marital difficulties in the first 7 years of marriage is relatively rare amongst those couples surveyed.

Finally, there is an important message for the Government and for Irish society in general: healthy, happy marriages make for strong family life; and strong families contribute to the economy and demand little in return from the taxpayer. In other words, “family capital” is at the core of “social capital”, upon which we build the future for our country.



Appendix I

A Note on Methodology

Amárach recruited 712 couples (1,424 adults) in their first 7 years of marriage to participate in this survey. The couples were randomly recruited at 50 sample points throughout the Republic of Ireland. The only criteria for recruitment were that they had been married between 1999 and 2005 (inclusive), and that both the husband and wife agreed to participate in the survey.

When a couple agreed to participate in the survey, they were each given a separate self-completion questionnaire to be completed at the time of the visit by an Amárach interviewer. These were then returned in separate envelopes to the interviewer before completing the visit (in other words, the questionnaires were not left to be completed and collected later, but had to be completed there and then).

The numbers of couples interviewed by year of marriage were as follows:

2005	–	135
2004	–	109
2003	–	114
2002	–	86
2001	–	78
2000	–	84
1999	–	106



Appendix 2

Marriage research literature referred to in preparing the ACCORD survey:

Does Marriage Make People Happy, Or Do Happy People Get Married?

Alois Stutzer & Bruno S. Frey, Institute for the Study of Labour, Discussion Paper IZA DP No. 1811.

Marriage & The Family Report 2002 - A Survey of the Health of Marriage in Massachusetts, Massachusetts Family Institute.

Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Statewide Baseline Survey, Bureau for Social Research, Oklahoma State University, Fall 2001.

How Was It For You? Report on Research Carried out on the First Year of Marriage, ACCORD 2001.

Unhappy Marriages: Does Counselling Help? Kieran McKeown, ACCORD, 2002

With this Ring ... A National Survey on Marriage in America, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2004.

Time, Sex & Money – The First Five Years of Marriage, the Centre for Marriage and the Family, Creighton University, 2000.



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