

the good childhood

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a national inquiry



The  
Children's  
Society

## **The Good Childhood Inquiry**

**Family: A summary of themes emerging from children and young people's evidence**

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## Summary

When we asked children and young people what makes a good life, they told us that:

- Love is the key
- Having a supportive and caring family is very important
- Parenting is important and should respect children and young people's need for freedom and independence
- They are aware of their physical needs for food, clothing and shelter, and the family's need to have "enough money"
- They value stability and security in their family relationships
- Divorce is a key topic, although some felt that divorce was less important than other things, for example, having a loving family
- They see abuse as a major detractor to a good childhood

When we asked children and young people what they think makes for a happy family life and a good parent, they reiterated all of the points listed above. In addition, they told us that:

- Mutual respect and trust are important factors in family relationships
- They like having time together as a family and doing things together
- Getting along together as a family and avoiding family conflicts is important. They dislike having arguments with parents and siblings, as well as seeing their parents argue with each other.
- They value communication that is open and supportive
- They dislike overprotective parents that overly constrain children's freedom, although they support clear guidelines for behaviour
- They think parents should be kind, considerate, nice, affectionate, caring, happy and fun
- School work and worries can impinge upon their home life

## Introduction

This briefing paper summarises children and young people's views about family emerging from a number of sources of evidence.

- 164 children and young people answered a number of questions about family via *The Good Childhood Inquiry's* 'My life' website during March and April 2007
- More than 1,240 comments and 3,880 votes were submitted by *Newsround* viewers in response to the same questions about family during April and May 2007
- 742 children and young people responded to the inquiry's call for evidence, which was open from September to November 2006
- 8,000 young people took part in The Children's Society's National Survey in 2005

## Questions about family

During March, April and May 2007, hundreds of children and young people responded to a number of questions about family via *The Good Childhood Inquiry and Newsround* websites. The questions that we posed were:

- What do you think makes a happy family?
- What do you think stops children and young people from having a good home life?
- What do you think makes a good parent?

We also asked a question to establish what family members they lived with, as well as two poll questions:

- When there are children in the family, should parents stay together even if they don't get along?
- What's the most important thing your family can give you? (Options: freedom, love, respect or support)

There were a number of small differences in the way that the questions were posed on the 'My life' and *Newsround* websites, the most important being that on the *Newsround* website each question could be answered individually. As a result, we know that 3,883 votes were cast and 1,240 comments were submitted via the *Newsround* website but not how many children and young people were involved overall.

### **Age and gender**

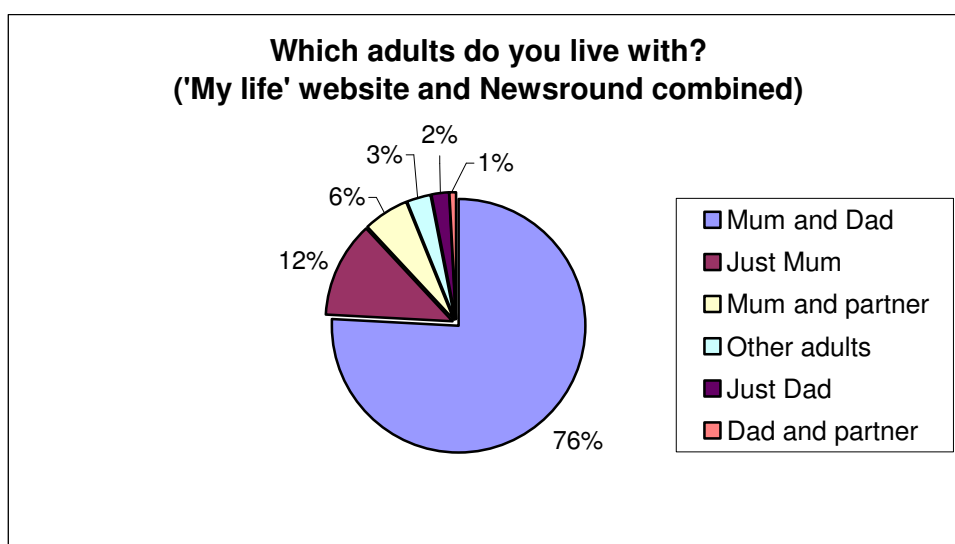
The 'My life' website and the *Newsround* website asked for demographic information in slightly different ways and so we do not have exactly the same data for each. We know the age and gender of children and young people that took part via the 'My life' website but not via the *Newsround* website.

<b>'My life' website: age and gender data</b>	
Male	23%
Female	77%
Age range	5-17 years
Average age	12 years
Standard deviation	3.2
Most common age	8 years

### **Family composition**

On the 'My life' website, we asked respondents whether they lived with their family, and if so, which family members they lived with. From this we know that 98% live with their family, and that 80% live with at least one sibling. On the *Newsround* website, children and young people were asked which adults they live with, with this question being posed as a poll. As a result, the only common data across both sets of respondents is about the adults that they live with, which we have presented below. It is worth mentioning that these figures are dependent on children's own definitions of "Mum" and "Dad".

<b>Q. Which adults do you live with?</b>		
	'My life' website (164 respondents)	<i>Newsround</i> (1,526 respondents)
Mum and Dad	73%	77%
Just Mum	14%	12%
Mum and partner	7%	6%
Other adults	4%	3%
Just Dad	2%	2%
Dad and partner	0%	1%



### **Question 1: What do you think makes a happy family?**

There was a degree of consistency in the topics raised by children and young people, with a number of key topics being mentioned in response to all three questions about family life. We discuss topics alongside the question that drew the most comments.

#### *Love*

Children and young people talked consistently about the importance of love, which they saw to be fundamental to a happy family and a crucial quality in a parent.

[What makes a happy family?]

*"it's just a family that loves each other, and as long as they do that's a happy family."* 8 year-old-girl

[What makes a good parent?]

*"A good parent is someone who loves us, respects us, helps us and cares for us. It doesn't have to be a natural mother or father, anyone can make you feel loved and special."* 13-year-old girl

A number of comments underlined the value of love by contrasting it with other 'goods' such as time, practical support and money.

[What makes a good parent?]

*"A loving parent who cares for and respects their child. They may not earn a lot or they may not be able to be around much, but if they love their child and they let them know that then, in my opinion, they are a good parent."* 16 year-old-girl

*"I think a good parent isn't one who makes dinner or helps you with homework because I can do that myself, but a person who is always there for you no matter what and will always love and accept you for who you are."* 13-year-old girl

### *Respect*

A large number of children and young people talked about the importance of living in a family environment in which each family member respects each other.

[What makes a happy family?]

*"Overall I think respect is the most important thing because if there is no respect for a person, they will never learnt to give it to others, and they will never understand that their actions have effects and they are responsible."* 16 year-old-girl

[What stops a good home life]

*“especially disrespect towards each other”*

Children and young people particularly stressed the importance of being respected by adults, of being listened to and having their views respected.

[What makes a happy family?]

*“talk to ur children like an adult with respect”* 10-year-old boy

[What makes a good parent?]

*“I think a good parent is someone who lets you speak your mind. Who doesn't just tell you to shut up just because they're older than you. Someone to help you with homework, someone who doesn't mock you or tell you that you're too young to understand.”* 13-year-old girl

*Time together / doing things together*

Many saw a happy family as one that spends time together, and where children feel that their parents have time for them. A good home life was felt to be hindered by having parents that are too busy, spend an excessive amount of time at work or have too many responsibilities. One child felt that a lack of time together led to the family not having anything to say to each other.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“Parents who do not have time to sit down and have family time with their children. Parents who let their children just fend for themselves (e.g. food).”* 14-year-old girl

*“When your parents are always arguing or have full time jobs they don't spend any time with you. Especially if you have no brothers or sisters. You feel lonely with nobody to talk to and all you can do is play on the computer or watch TV.”* 10-year-old girl

Children and young people also expressed the view that doing things together was a crucial part of family life, and believed that families should make time

for eating meals together, enjoying activities together, taking holidays and going places as a family.

[What makes a happy family?]

*“lots of family things, lots of playdates, people visit you, you visit people, everyone together on weekends”* 9-year-old girl

[What makes a good parent?]

*“A good parent has days out with their kids when they can interact with them without interruption.”* 12-year-old girl

### *Getting along*

Children and young people emphasised the importance of getting along well as a family and having a pleasant atmosphere at home. They also expressed clear dislike for arguments and conflict in the family, which is discussed in the next section.

[What makes a good parent?]

*“not just acting as a parent but as a friend”* 15 year-old-girl

### *Communication*

Many children and young people were of the opinion that a happy family is one in which there is good, open and supportive communication. They liked being able to talk about both trivial and significant issues, and many felt that the family is an important outlet in which to express their inner worries.

[What makes a happy family?]

*“Being able to talk - about anything and everything.”*

[What stops a good home life?]

*“If there is no communication, life can be hard, if the child feels that they have no one to turn to in a sticky situation they may use other methods of expressing themselves e.g. through anger and sometimes self-harm.”* 14-year-old girl

However, it was pointed out that children shouldn't be forced to talk when they would rather not.

[What stops a good home life?]

*"when they don't let the children express their feelings how they want, eg, they HAVE to talk about how they're feeling when they don't want to."* 14-year-old girl

### *Guidelines for behaviour*

It was interesting to see a number of children and young people highlighting the need for guidelines for behaviour, a familiar concern of adults. Children's comments show that they see the value of having rules clearly explained to them so that they understand what is expected of them, and the difference between right and wrong.

[What makes a happy family?]

*"firmness and rules, so you know when you have crossed the line."* 11-year-old girl

[What stops a good home life?]

*"if the parent doesn't set boundaries, the child will make it hard for themselves by mis-behaving."* 14-year-old girl

A number of children showed dislike for punishments, with specific comments about being grounded or being made to "stand in the silly corner". However, in general there was a degree of approval for the need to discipline children that have been "naughty" so they know that they have done something wrong, as long as that discipline was not too harsh.

[What makes a happy family?]

*"If a parent teaches a child what is wrong and right without punishing them harshly by smacking or hitting them."* 12-year-old girl

### *Trust*

The importance of being trusted was underlined by many children and young people, and mutual trust was seen as an important aspect of good of family relationships.

[What makes a happy family?]

*“Trusting them. But I suppose we’ve got to be good so they can trust us - earn it as my Mum & Dad say.”* 14-year-old girl

### **Question 2: What do you think stops children and young people from having a good home life?**

#### *Family conflicts*

Family arguments and conflicts were mentioned by a large number of children and young people, conveying a strong dislike for family arguments whether they were participants or not.

Some focused on arguments in which they were directly involved, disliking being told off and shouted at by their parents, or arguing and fighting with their brothers and sisters. Nonetheless, a couple of children asserted that a few quarrels every now and then weren’t such a bad thing!

[What stops a good home life?]

*“arguments are a large part of domestic insecurity. That is arguments between parents, siblings, children. Both silent and outspoken.”* 12 year-old-girl

Most of the comments about family disputes, however, related to arguments between parents, which was felt to have an unsettling impact on children.

[What stops a good home life?]

*"maybe the parents arguing. young kids are so easily affected by this."*

15 year-old-boy

[What stops a good home life?]

*"I think all kids should have the right to live in a happy place where they feel safe and loved. I haven't felt like that in some time but I know my parents don't mean it. It's just they argue and take it out on me"*

14-year-old boy

Children often talked about being brought into the conflict by their parents.

[What makes a happy family?]

*"It the parents fight, the children are sort of made to chose which parent, even though the parents don't say it, we can pick up what they want us to do. Which is unfair to us kids as all we want to do is get on with our lives quick, happy and quietly."*

17 year-old-girl

[What stops a good home life?]

*"Well, when your parents are having a fight then you don't know who to go with."*

12-year-old girl

### *Divorce*

Children and young people also raised the question of divorce.

[What stops a good home life?]

*"Parents, parents and parents again! Years ago, divorce was unheard of. Now, half of married couples get divorced! It's hard on the kids, and they'll think they can do it when they're older."*

12-year-old boy

Discussions of divorce and parental arguments were closely linked, and sometimes discussed in the same breath.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“if their parents, after being divorced, fight over the children, of still argue ect. Like say, if the children want to split the time between the two parents, the parents hate seeing each other, it makes it harder.”*

13-year-old girl

However, in some cases divorce was seen as preferable to parental conflict.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“People automatically seem to think that your parents have to be together for you to be happy, otherwise you are unhappy, but I don't think that this is the case. If one parent used to beat the other or they used to constantly argue, then being apart is good.”* 13-year-old girl

[What stops a good home life?]

*“When my parents used to argue, it was the worst thing ever. But now, my parents are divorced and it's so much better because we don't have those arguments.”* 11-year-old girl

### *Abuse*

One of the most common responses to the question of what stops a good home life was “if the child is being abused”. Comments about abuse tended to be very general and so it was not clear whether they reflected a high level of awareness of the issue, or were an indication of personal experience.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“If you have parent/s that abuse you, then that stops young people from having a good home life.”* 12-year-old girl

### *Freedom and overprotective parents*

Children and young people talked a lot about overprotective parents and their need to be given some freedom. They often discussed these ideas in the context of their friendships, wanting to have the same level of freedom as their friends and be able to do things they felt were “normal”.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“no freedom for children(not aloud to go meet up with friends)” 14-year-old girl*

*“sometimes parents [...] stop their children doing normal things like going to the cinema because they're scared about what will happen and then we feel like it's unfair because our friends are allowed and we just get more and more angry and upset” 17-year-old girl*

### *Siblings*

Relationships with siblings were also discussed, most often in a negative sense. Comments focused on arguments and bullying between siblings, rivalry, and favouritism. A couple of specific comments also highlighted the upsetting effect of being separated from a sibling.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“i think its the little things aswell like having other siblings them getting more attention or being more close to the parents or anything really.”  
15-year-old girl*

### *School and schoolwork*

Interestingly, school was mentioned in a number of responses as having a negative impact on home life. Children and young people spoke of the weight of schoolwork and worries about school life being conveyed to their home life.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“School can stop children and young people from having a good home life. You can't switch on and off how you feel (well, most people can't). If school is bad, then you will probably feel bad at home.” 13-year-old girl*

### **Question 3: What do you think makes a good parent?**

As already discussed, there was a high level of consistency between the topics raised in response to this question and the previous two. However, when asked what makes a good parent, children and young people particularly emphasised a number of qualities, such as being supportive, kind, considerate and nice, affectionate and caring, happy and fun.

*“kind, considerate, caring, a good listener, fun, happy and child friendly”*

10-year-old girl

*“someone who helps there child and talks to them and is nice all the time /friendly”* 10-year-old girl

#### *Support*

Support was the quality that drew the most remarks. Some focused on the need for parents to provide emotional support, and to be there for their children when things are difficult.

*“A family should trust each other and be nothing but themselves when around each other. A good family is not the perfect family like shown on TV but the family that is happy overall and can help each other through bad times.”* 13-year-old girl

Others underlined the need for practical support as well, such as help with homework and other things.

*“One that helps you with things like homework and spends time with you and is good to have around.”* 8-year-old girl

[What makes a happy family]

#### *Care*

The importance of having parents that care about them was also a key factor.

[What stops a good home life?]

*“If their parents don't care about them so they neglect them.”* 11-year-old girl

*“Someone who loves their children and cares for them, someone who if there isn't enough food they give their share just to keep the children alive.”* 11-year-old girl

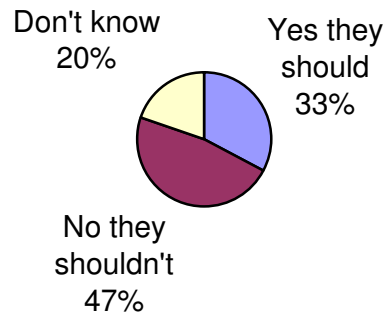
## **Poll questions**

### **Question 4: Should parents who argue stay together?**

In total 1,711 votes were cast in response to this question, which was worded slightly differently on the two websites, with the ‘My life’ website asking “When there are children in the family, should parents stay together even if they don't get along?” and the *Newsround* website asking “Should parents who argue stay together?” The high number of children and young people that chose “Don't know” shows that not everyone found this an easy one to answer.

<b>Q. Should parents who argue stay together?</b>		
	<b>‘My life’ website (488 respondents)</b>	<b><i>Newsround</i> (1,223 respondents)</b>
Yes	40%	30%
No	49%	47%
Don't Know	12%	23%

**Should parents who argue stay together?  
('My life' website and Newsround combined)**

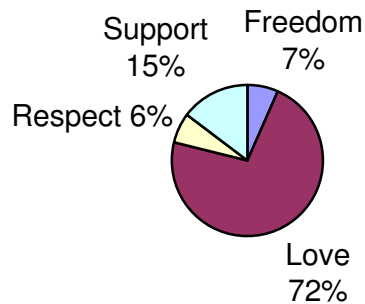


**Question 4: What's the most important thing a family can give you?**

In total 1,643 votes were cast in response to this question, which gave children four options to choose between: freedom, love, respect and support. Love was the runaway winner, with over 70% of the vote.

<b>Q. What's the most important thing a family can give you?</b>		
	'My life' website	Newsround
Freedom	8%	6%
Love	77%	70%
Respect	5%	7%
Support	10%	17%

**What's the most important thing a family can give you? ('My life' website and Newsround combined)**



### **Questions about a good childhood**

The family was clearly of paramount importance to the children and young that submitted evidence to *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, and those that took part in The Children's Society's national survey in 2005. Many of the themes emerging from these two sources of evidence were very similar, focusing on love, support, freedom and safety, and so we discuss them together below.

### **The call for evidence**

Between 18 September and 13 November 2006, we received submissions from 742 children and young people aged 5 to 17 years in response to our call for evidence. In most cases the three questions being answered were:

- What do you think are the most important things that make for a good life for children and young people?
- What things do you think stop children and young people from having a good life?
- What changes do you think could be made that would improve things for children and young people?

## **National Survey 2005**

In 2005 The Children's Society carried out a national survey of a representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16 years in partnership with University of York, in 16 areas of England. In this survey, we posed two questions relating to a good childhood, which were answered by 8,000 respondents:

- What do you think are the most important things that make for a good life for young people?
- What things do you think stop young people from having a good life?

### *Love*

Unprompted, a large number of children and young people said that being loved was an essential element of a good childhood. The majority of these comments discussed love in the same breath as family or parents, suggesting that they saw family as the primary source of love and affection.

*“Children have a good childhood if they have love from their parents.”*

14 year old boy

*“it is important for me that childhood is sealed with a kiss – it must be full & bursting of love!”*

Feeling cared about and valued was another topic that children and young people raised with direct reference to the family.

*“Having parents that really care about you and take time out just to spend with you”*

*“when parents don't care about their children”* 15-year-old girl

Some drew links between love and care, and feeling safe and secure:

*“A secure and safe atmosphere with a home and family that care about you. Friends are also vital and being able to get the chance to do more with life.”*

Families who ‘don’t care’ were identified as one of a number of factors that stopped them from having a good life:

*“bullying, drugs, smoking, family that doesn't care.”*

### *Support*

Children and young people emphasised the crucial role of the family in providing support and help.

*“a supportive and loving family”*

*“Having family and friends to turn to if you are upset or need advice”*

Some of the comments on support also indicate the connections and tensions between the different qualities that young people valued in the family:

*“Supportive family that cares but gives you some freedom and trusts you. lots of close friends that you trust + have fun with. loads of activities in area to stop gangs hanging around bored. supportive + understanding teachers that are prepared to give extra help.”*

### *Freedom*

Restrictive parenting was often mentioned in relation to what stops children and young people from having a good life. This category is one that appeared to be more important to teenagers than to younger children.

*“Parents trying to help kids to be safe and being strict. This affects teenagers when their on their teens because they want to go out late and have fun but parents wont let them.”*

Young people were often quite realistic about the need for limitations to freedom:

*“\* Parents allowing them to do stuff, but saying that, being strict as well.”*

Moreover, a minority of the comments within this category referred to parents that do not establish appropriate boundaries:

*“Parents not have enough control kids disobeying too many people.”*

### *Family, parents and parenting*

Some children and young people talked quite simply of family, and of having a family, as being a fundamental part of a good childhood.

*“I think that a good family makes a good childhood because you’ve always got someone to tell your problems and your never lonely.”*

They also regularly talked about their parents as being a key influence on their childhood experiences. Comments ranged from the importance of having "good" or "nice" parents to more sophisticated analyses of parenting.

*“Well you can’t really stop people having children if they want but they should be able to keep you happy + secure.”* 14-year-old girl

*“If a child is unhappy because he or she does not have an MP3 player or some such item then it’s a lack of proper parenting and knowledge which is ruining the child’s life, not the lack of an MP3 player.”* 16-year-old girl

### *Physical needs*

Children and young people highlighted the importance of meeting their physical needs, and having sufficient food, shelter, clothing and other necessities.

*“Shelter. Food. Necessities”*

*“Somewhere to live where they feel safe, access to food, running water, warmth and clothes” 14-year-old girl*

Comments in this area also related to the significance of the home, and having a comfortable environment to live in.

*“Living in a nice, comfortable environment is important too” 15-year-old girl*

### *Abuse*

Younger children in particular stressed that a good childhood should be free from abuse of all kinds.

*“being assaulted at home, not having food and taking drugs, smoking, and alcohol” 12 year old boy*

*“There’s far too much abuse, sexual, physical and emotional. And no matter how much you say to young people that it’s ok to speak up, there’s always going to be many who don’t, out of fear and uncertainty etc.. ” 16 year old girl*

### *Divorce*

A considerable number of children and young people discussed the effect of divorce on the experience of childhood.

*“I think that a young person needs love from his/ her family & a divorce is not helpful.”*

However, a number of children and young people expressed concerns to the opposite effect.

*“Parents argue and agree to stay together 'for the sake of the children' but it causes a horrible atmosphere and it's worse then it would be if they broke up.” 14-year-old girl*