

the good childhood

a national inquiry



The
Children's
Society

The Good Childhood Inquiry

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Family: A summary of selected research evidence

This document consists of a collection of papers that were presented to *The Good Childhood Inquiry* panel at each of the six themed meetings that were held as part of the inquiry process. The papers were produced by a range of people including panel members and staff at The Children's Society.

The papers were intended to provide a brief summary of relevant social research findings and associated material on a set of topics previously identified by the panel as being of interest in relation to the theme being discussed. This was one of the means by which we ensured that the inquiry was informed by evidence.

Given the very wide range of topics being considered by the panel, it was decided to focus where possible on summarising existing literature reviews and other overviews of previous work which were available, together with a more detailed consideration of a small number of recent works.

The papers are being published on the website in order to provide as much information as possible about the Inquiry process and also in the hope that they may be of value to others. However, whilst every effort was made to ensure that the papers were produced to a high standard, we would not wish to imply that the papers provided a comprehensive or systematic review of the topic area. Any such work also involves both selection and interpretation and so we would encourage readers to refer to the original sources which are extensively referenced in the papers.

Any views expressed in the papers are those of the original authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Children's Society or of *The Good Childhood Inquiry* panel.

1. Introduction

This paper summarises a range of selected research evidence that is intended to assist *The Good Childhood Inquiry* panel in considering, in relation to the Family theme, the following core inquiry questions:

What are the conditions for a good childhood?

What obstacles exist to those conditions?

What changes could be made that would be likely to improve childhood?

In analysing and presenting this material we have attempted wherever possible to consider the implications of the evidence from the perspectives of children themselves.

In this introductory section we:

- Summarise some of the general perspectives on the significance of family for a good childhood, based on material gathered for the inquiry from children and adults
- Suggest an overall framework, drawn from the research and practice literature, which provides a structure within which to organise the very wide range of interconnected issues and factors which are relevant to the Family theme

Children's perspectives on the family

Our aim is to approach the issue of family from a child's perspective. So we begin with a consideration of young people's perspectives on the family conditions that contribute to a good childhood, based primarily on views that children and young people have contributed to the inquiry.

The table below summarises the key family themes identified in young people’s contributions to *The Good Childhood Inquiry* through three routes:

- The survey of a national representative sample of 14- to 16-year-olds, which we undertook in 2005. Over 8,000 young people contributed their views on a good childhood.
- The ‘call for evidence’ incorporating the views of 742 children and young people
- Children and young people’s comments on family submitted via *The Good Childhood Inquiry*’s ‘My life’ website and the *BBC Newsround* website – more than 2,000 took part.

Table 1: Children’s views on family issues re: a good childhood

<i>National survey</i>	<i>Call for evidence</i>	<i>The ‘my life’ and BBC Newsround websites</i>
Love / care	Love	Love
Support	Freedom from abuse	Getting along together / freedom from family conflicts
Freedom	Quality of parenting	Support
Stability and security	Physical needs	Respect
Physical needs met	Support	Time together / doing things together
Freedom from abuse	Care / feeling valued	Care
	Divorce / family breakdown	Communication

As is evident from the table, there is a high degree of similarity in the views contributed via these different routes. The summary of children’s views on

Family (a separate document) provides some illustration of the types of issues identified by young people under each theme.

Adult’s perspectives on the family

The perspectives we have gathered from adults also stem from three sources:

- 1,184 submissions to the call for evidence by adults in the general public
- 442 submissions to the call for evidence by professionals and agencies
- Views gathered from members of *The Good Childhood Inquiry* panel on the key themes which the inquiry should address

The table below summarises the key themes identified through these three routes:

Table 2: Adults’ views on family issues re: a good childhood

<i>General public</i>	<i>Professionals</i>	<i>Panel</i>
Love	Love	Love / feeling wanted
Working parents / childcare	Safety, security and protection	Working parents / childcare
Safety, security and protection	Financial security / poverty	Relationship between parents, marriage and divorce

Guidelines for behaviour	Care / feeling valued	Parenting and parental commitment to children
Stability	Parents / quality of parenting	Abuse, violence at home
Spending time together	Guidelines for behaviour (family)	Siblings
Discipline / control		Individual differences
Having two parents / parents living together		Family as a political question
		Community and neighbourhood
		Children without a family

More detailed information on the views expressed by professionals and agencies on the theme of Family is provided in a separate summary of this evidence. In broad terms it can be seen that there is a good degree of overlap between children's and adult's views, although there are some differences in emphasis between the two groups.

An organising framework for the Family theme

The material from children and adults presented above illustrates the complexity and inter-connectedness of the range of issues which the panel needs to consider in discussing the Family theme. This complexity is also evident in the research literature which we have reviewed for this theme. A recurring theme in the literature is the difficulty of disentangling the different factors related to the family which may affect children's well-being.

A framework which is potentially helpful in bringing some clarity to this complex picture is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner distinguishes between two groups of family factors which may impact on child development:

- Distal or structural (e.g. economic factors)
- Proximal or micro-level (e.g. parenting style)

A version of this model, as presented in IPPR's *Freedom's Orphans* report (Margo & Dixon, 2006), is shown in Figure 1 below.

[NB Figure not included here for copyright reasons. Please see Margo & Dixon, 2006]

As Margo & Dixon summarise:

In this model, the micro-level processes are factors that enable the child to 'buck the trend' and overcome disadvantage, but they are also determined in part by whether the parent will have the time and resources to undertake them well. So for example, having a warm and loving relationship with a parent can override the impact of living in a lone-parent family, but this depends on whether that lone parent is able to spend quality time with the child.

(Margo & Dixon, 2006: 92-93)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework also informed the development of the Assessment Framework – one of the key components of the UK Government's current developments in relation to children's services.

The framework consists of three dimensions:

1. Development of the baby, child or young person
2. Parents and carers

3. Family and environmental

This Assessment Framework can be represented as a triangle of interacting dimensions as shown in Figure 2 below.

[NB Figure not included here for copyright reasons. Please see www.everychildmatters.gov.uk]

These three dimensions are broadly similar to the three dimensions in Figure 1.

The ecological framework, as applied by Margo and Dixon (2006) and the Assessment Framework, is potentially helpful in structuring the discussion about the family conditions for a good childhood.

Using this framework, it can be seen that many of the themes identified by children and adults focus on the micro-level family processes, for example:

- Love
- Safety, security and protection
- Freedom from abuse
- Support
- Appropriate boundaries
- Quality of parenting style in general

Children and adults also identified a number of factors at a structural level including:

- Divorce / family breakdown (children)
- Working parents (general public and panel members)
- Family structure (general public and panel members)

- Financial security / poverty (professionals)

Within Bronfenbrenner's model these are all factors which do not necessarily have a direct impact on child development but influence and are mediated by micro-level factors relating to parenting and family relationships.

Margo and Dixon (2006) cite analysis of UK cohort studies that appears to support this approach – suggesting that the link between structural factors and child development outcomes is substantially mediated by micro-level family processes. So for example, the level of family income has only a weak link with children's self-esteem once the quality of parent-child relationships are taken into account. Viewed in this way, the quality of relationships within the family is an important buffer that can either reduce or increase the impact of structural factors on children's well-being.

Structure of the evidence

In view of the above discussion, we have structured the evidence in the following way.

There are three substantive sections.

The first of these focuses on families, work and poverty.

The second looks at parental separation and conflict.

The third looks at the evidence on how children's relationships within the family can affect child development and well-being. It considers the issues of parenting and parent-child relationships; the role of fathers; and the impact of maltreatment on children's lives.

References

Bronfenbrenner U (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Margo J & Dixon M with Pearce N & Reed H (2006) *Freedom's Orphans: Raising Youth in a Changing World*. London: IPPR

1. Families, Work and Poverty

Here we look at a set of related issues - work-life balance, parental employment and poverty, which were identified as important issues in relation to a good childhood in the responses to the call for evidence.

There are two main sections. The first section looks at the theme of 'Families and Work'. The second section briefly reviews evidence on the impact of poverty on children and young people.

Each section presents evidence on the policy context, statistics, attitudes and research findings.

Families and Work

Policy context

The Labour Government has introduced a number of significant policy developments over the last decade, summarised by Dex & Ward (2007) as follows:

- Enhanced maternity leave and pay conditions
- The right to take unpaid parental leave
- Paid paternity leave
- Tax credits (originally Working Families Tax Credit, revised in 2003)
- A National Childcare Strategy to provide accessible, affordable, quality childcare
- A Work-Life Balance initiative which included the introduction of the right to request flexible working arrangements

Trends

The key relevant patterns and trends in relation to work are:

Working mothers and dual-earner families

There has been a large rise in working mothers, especially amongst women with a child under the age of 5 (Labour Market Trends, 2002 cited in Dex, 2003); and very little change in fathers' employment rates (Dex, 2003).

These trends are reflected over a longer term in the rise of dual-earner households from just over 50% in 1979 to over 60% in 1995-6. Households with 1.5-earners (one full-time and one part-time wage) are now the most common pattern. Lone mothers are less likely to work than mothers in couples, but the number of lone mothers working is also increasing (HM Treasury, 2003)

These trends vary by ethnic group. Dex and Ward (2007) note that father-only earner families were the most common model in Bangladeshi and Pakistani families; there were higher than average rates of lone parent households amongst Black African/Caribbean families; and families with two full-time working parents were most common in Indian and Black Caribbean families

The reasons for this major change in women's engagement in paid work cited in the literature (Burgess, 2002; Dex, 2003; Gregg et al, 2003) are:

- Rights – Enhanced maternity rights, equal opportunities and equal pay legislation
- Qualifications – Increased female educational qualifications leading to increased motivation to work

- Economic – decline in men’s real wages, increased job insecurity, high cost of housing, extended transitions to adulthood by young people

Childcare

Against this backdrop of increasing rates of mothers’ employment, the proportion of men who are primary carers for children has increased but is still only the pattern in 2% of families with children (Johnes, 2006).

The increase in working mothers has led to a rise in the use of non-parental childcare, including formal childcare arrangements (Dex & Ward, 2007). This trend is more pronounced amongst higher socioeconomic groups and amongst lone mothers (La Valle et al, 2002); and less common amongst South Asian families (Dex & Ward, 2007).

Grandparents also act as carers in between a third and over one half of families, varying by mother’s occupation.

Patterns of work

There has also been substantial change in patterns of working:

Atypical working (working at the weekend and on weekdays outside the hours 8.30 to 5.30) has increased. This pattern is higher amongst parents than non-parents, and higher still amongst lone parents (La Valle et al, 2002). Reasons for this trend include economic and career factors (particularly amongst men); preferences regarding reconciling work and family life (particularly amongst women); and external factors such as the increase in Sunday opening, and the lack of childcare. Atypical working increased the likelihood of informal childcare arrangements, and also of fathers looking after children while the mother works.

There was a substantial increase in long working hours in the 1980s and 1990s (TUC, 2000 cited in Lewis, 2003). More recently there has been a reduction but the proportions working long hours are still relatively high

compared to other European countries. Long hours are more common amongst men than women (La Valle et al, 2002)

La Valle et al (2002) also note a pattern of 'shift parenting' where couples share childcare responsibilities and work at different times of day.

More parents are now self-employed (Bell and La Valle, 2003) – 8% of mothers and 16% of fathers in 2001.

Walby (2007) notes the increase in home workers from 2.3 million in 1997 to 3.1 million in 2005.

Attitudes

The work-life balance

Opinion polls have shown high levels of concern about the work-life balance.

Thirty years after the Sex Discrimination Act, nearly three in five people believed balancing work and family life has actually got harder for working women

(ICM poll for Equal Opportunities Commission, 2006)

The British Social Attitudes Survey 2002 indicated that over a third of respondents had found it difficult to fulfil their family responsibilities because of the amount of time they spent on their work in the last three months.

Dex and Ward (2007) report that 16% of mothers and 57% of fathers felt they did not spend enough time with their 9- to 10-month-old child; although most parents (over 90%) felt that they had a warm relationship with their children and for mothers this was more likely where they had been continuously employed rather than where they had never worked. La Valle et al (2002) found that lone mothers were more likely than partnered mothers to be dissatisfied with the amount of time available to spend with children.

Mothers working

Attitudes surveys reveal a split in the population on attitudes to the impact of mothers working on young children's well-being. The British Social Attitudes Survey 2002 found that 37% of respondents agreed with the statement '*A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works*' and a slightly higher proportion (42%) disagreed (the remainder were not sure or did not respond)

Gender roles

The summary of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research programme on '*Families and Work in the 21st Century*' (JRF, 2003) note a degree of change in attitudes to traditional gender roles in heterosexual couples. However the same research programme still identified key areas of difference in women and men's attitudes to parenting (although some of the studies gathered information from mothers only).

Childcare preferences

A key theme from the JRF research programme was a potential tension between Government strategy of promoting formal childcare provision and some parents' childcare preferences (e.g. for care from relatives).

Nevertheless there is evidence from other sources of widespread support for government support for some forms of organised non-parental childcare (ICM, 2005 – poll for Equal Opportunities Commission) and for financial support for childcare when both parents work (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2002).

Attitudes to new legislation

Houston & Waulmsley (2003) found that women were more positive than men about flexible working arrangements.

Smeaton (2006) found that fathers in dual-earner professional families were the most likely to take paternity leave, although the most significant barrier for fathers in low-skilled jobs was more likely to be financial than attitudinal.

Children's views

A survey of young people's attitudes (Park et al, 2004) found that young people were more liberal in their attitudes about mothers working and about traditional gender roles than adults, although their attitude to the latter had moved slightly towards a traditional view in recent years.

Research findings

The above review of policy, demographics and attitudes has highlighted:

- The substantial increase in dual-earner families and the consequences for non-parental childcare and time spent by parents outside the home
- Concerns about the stresses which working parents face in attempting balance work and family life.

We now turn to a summary of research, which has attempted to identify the direct and indirect effects on children of these significant changes in parental working patterns in the UK and elsewhere over the last two decades. There are a number of identifiable strands to this research.

First, a substantial amount of attention has been given to the impact of non-parental care in the pre-school years on child development and the longer-term consequences.

Second, there has been a developing enquiry into the impact of parental work on family life both in terms of parental absence from the home and the possibility that work stresses have a negative impact on family life.

The focus in both these respects has often been on the potential negative impact of parents working. However, research has also highlighted some fairly straightforward benefits, which may also filter through to enhance children's well-being.

For working mothers in couples (compared to the traditional father-earner model) and lone working mothers:

- employment brings additional income which confers advantages for the whole family and
- can be a positive experience for mothers in terms of status and satisfaction.

In addition, for couples the dual-earner model can

- provide insurance against job insecurities, and
- balance and enhance the couple's relationship.

The impact of non-parental childcare

The issue of the consequences of pre-school childcare for children's cognitive, language and behavioural development has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. This debate is complicated by different patterns for different groups of children (and, in particular, differences between findings for all children and those for children in disadvantaged groups) as well as varying findings for different amounts, types and quality of care. There are also methodological issues regarding the measures used and selection effects.

There is also some divergence in the findings on cognitive and language development compared to those on emotional and behavioural development.

It should be noted that whilst this issue is closely related to the 'Families and Work' theme it also has a wider relevance. Some of the arguments in favour of pre-school education apply to all children, and particularly disadvantaged children, irrespective of whether their parent(s) are in paid work. However, given the close links noted earlier between parents' employment status and the use of non-parental childcare, it seems to make sense to discuss these issues here.

Cognitive and language development

The most consistent evidence on cognitive and language development relates to the impact of pre-school educational provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Several major US initiatives (Perry, Abecedarian, Chicago) showed positive results in this respect (see Penn et al, 2006). Melhuish (2003) also concludes that cost-benefit analysis shows substantial long-term financial benefits to society of pre-school care.

However, in a systematic review, Penn et al argue that this US evidence may

not be transferable to the UK context, and also that the targeted nature of these initiatives on disadvantaged minority ethnic families may be problematic and stigmatising.

Sylva et al (2004) found a similarly positive impact on cognitive development and academic skills for disadvantaged children in the UK. These results were enhanced where the provision was of good quality and where the children came from a mixture of backgrounds.

In terms of the findings on cognitive development for children in general. Sylva et al (2004) reported positive benefits of pre-school education both in the short-term and during Key Stage 1 in school. In the US, Harvey (1999) found only very limited evidence of negative effects of childcare in the early years; and also noted the positive impact of early parental employment on children's development through the benefits of increased family income. Finally in a recent analysis of longitudinal data in the UK, Gregg et al (2005) also found that:

On average, it is only full time work before the child is 18 months of age that seems to have any adverse consequences for children's cognitive development and these effects are quantitatively small and often insignificant. Part time work and work after 18 months are not harmful. These conclusions are robust to the inclusion of a wide range of background control variables and we find no evidence that our estimates are subject to a substantial omitted variables bias.

Melhuish identifies three waves of research in this field, and notes that the debate has moved from whether children are placed in non-parental childcare settings to the quantity and quality of childcare received and more recently to the interface between non-parental childcare and the family environment.

Emotional and behavioural development

The evidence on the impact of pre-school non-parental childcare on children's emotional and behaviour development shows a similar pattern.

Sylva et al (2004) conclude for the UK that there were slightly higher levels of anti-social behaviour where children had experienced high levels of poor-quality group care in the first few years of life, although these might be mitigated by good quality care at a slightly older age.

However, Leseman (2002), in a review for the OECD noted US research which suggested longer-term negative impacts on behaviour for children who had experienced high quantity of centre-based day care, irrespective of quality of care or home environment. Belsky (2001) also argues this case, being primarily concerned with '*early extensive and continuous nonmaternal care and ... low quality childcare*'.

However what seems to be at issue here is not only whether there are statistically significant effects but also the size of the effects. Much of the evidence only indicates (at worst) modest negative impacts on children's behaviour even in the specific context of full-time poor quality care. Thus, for example the NICHD Study found no evidence that the quantity of time spent in childcare was associated with clinical levels of behaviour problems (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). As a result, for example, Belsky concedes that:

Family factors and processes are typically more predictive of child functioning than child-care factors and processes.

(Belsky, 2001)

Thus, whilst there may be some negative impact on social behaviour of extensive childcare in the first year or two, what is going on within the family environment appears to be much more important.

The NICHD Study also provides information on the quality of maternal attachment in the early years. The findings suggest some evidence of associations between lower quality and higher quantity of non-parental child care and likelihood of insecure attachment, but only when combined with low maternal sensitivity / responsiveness (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997 and 1999).

The impact of parental work on family life

The debate about the impact of parental work on family life and therefore on children's well-being has focused on two key issues. First, whether the increased absence of parental involvement due to working has a negative impact on children. Second, whether parents' work-related stress affects children's well-being.

To provide an overview of the key arguments here, the literature has primarily focused on the ways in which the effects of parental work (viewed as a structural issue) may be transmitted to affect children's well-being through the impact on micro-level processes within the family – ensuring basic care, safety and protection; high warmth / low conflict; and providing guidance and boundaries.

Limited parental involvement due to work commitments

A number of the trends noted earlier in this paper – dual-earner families, long working hours, atypical hours – would suggest that time spent with children is limited for working parents.

A number of studies (cited in Soenens, 2006) have suggested that parental monitoring and knowledge of their children's whereabouts is linked to risk-taking behaviours in adolescence. There are some questions regarding the causality and meaning of these findings with some authors suggesting that the studies illustrate the benefits of self-disclosure by young people rather than of parental monitoring itself (Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

However, given the potentially negative impacts of low parental monitoring on children's well-being, there has been some exploration of the question as to whether parental work commitments lead to lower levels of parental monitoring. A study by Crouter et al (1999) in the US concluded that the fact that mothers worked did not affect their knowledge of their children's behaviour and might actually increase father's knowledge. A qualitative UK study had broadly similar findings and clarified some of the factors that may be at play here. Sarre (2006) reported that dual-earner parents were able to

some extent to balance the demands of their work with their parental role and that there was no evidence of increased risk-taking by young people as a consequence of parents working.

The impact of work-related stress on children and young people

There has been a more substantial amount of research on the possible spillover effects of work-related stress on family life and on children and young people in particular.

Certainly, the JRF 'Families & Work in the 21st Century' programme identified some key concerns from working parents in this respect, including:

- *'Irritability and bad moods with the family, especially after a bad day;*
- *Impatience with children and their slow pace after the fast pace of work;*
- *Lower quality of relationships at home because of the stresses of work;*
- *Time with spouse curtailed;*
- *Insufficient energy to respond to children's requests;*
- *Children not liking parents working at the weekend or when they are ill;*
- *Parents' feelings of guilt;*
- *Time with children squeezed due to long hours of work; and*
- *Work encroaching into family life where parents worked at home.'*

(JRF, 2003: 7)

Bumpass et al (1999) cite several studies that found a link between work stress and family dynamics. A number of studies, primarily in the US, have explored the issue of whether these factors extend further to have a negative impact on children's well-being. These studies have specifically sought to understand the possible transmission mechanisms by which work-related stress might impact on children's well-being. Crouter et al (1999) found some evidence that work pressure led to parental role overload which in turn

leads to parent-child conflict and therefore negatively impacts on children's psychological well-being and Sallinen (2004) reached similar conclusions. Other studies have found that work stress leads to punitive parenting leading to externalising problem behaviour or to parental withdrawal thus affecting young people's self-esteem and depression (Repetti, 1994, cited in Bumpass et al, 1999). It should be noted that most of these studies were cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and so cannot provide evidence of causal relationships.

Despite this evidence, Perry-Jenkins (2000) notes that in terms of ongoing work stress, this may or may not have an impact on family life depending on the working parent's coping mechanisms. And short-term stress tended to have an impact only in certain contexts – such as when accompanied by conflict in the relationships between parents.

These observations are supported by the summary of the JRF research programme, which noted that it is not a simple question of whether parents are working:

- 'The *quality* of work matters. Bad days and feeling a lack of autonomy can have a bad effect on family life (Reynolds et al., 2003).
- The *quantity* of work matters. Long hours can have a bad effect (La Valle et al., 2002; Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; Reynolds et al., 2003).
- The *time of day* work is carried out matters. Working when children are at home, especially at weekends, was seen as a problem and created considerable dissatisfaction (Baines et al., 2003 forthcoming; La Valle et al., 2002). '

Poverty

Policy context

In 1999, the current Labour government made a commitment to end child poverty within a generation. The central objective of ensuring that children do not live in households with incomes below a certain level, relative to contemporary norms, has produced some specific target milestones. These are that the percentage of children in households with below 60 per cent median income should fall from its 1998/99 level by a quarter by 2004/05, by half by 2010 and to a minimal level (variously interpreted as between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of children) by 2020. Over the last 8 years the government has introduced a number of initiatives and measures in pursuit of this goal, including the introduction of the minimum wage and changes to the taxation and benefits systems. In addition, as reviewed earlier in this paper, a central feature of the government's anti-poverty strategy has been to support increased labour market participation.

Key statistics and trends

In government figures and analyses, children living in households with below 60 per cent of the median income are defined as living in poverty. Using this measure, the following key trends have been identified:

- The proportion of children living in poverty has doubled in the past generation.
- The UK has proportionally more poor children than most rich countries.
- In 2005, 3.4 million children (after housing costs) were living in poverty. This represents a reduction of 700,000 children living in poverty since

1998/1999 when the government made a commitment to end child poverty by 2020. This equates to a reduction of 17%, which falls short of the government's target of 25% by 2005.

- Some children are more at risk of poverty than others. An analysis of the latest figures shows that children living in: lone parent families; workless families; large families (with 3 or more children); families containing one or more disabled adults; a family headed by someone from an ethnic minority, in particular someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin; families living in inner London.

Attitudes

- An ICM 2006 poll for The Guardian found that more people thought others were living in poverty now than in 1997 (57% compared to 36%).
- This was not supported in The British Social Attitudes Survey data over the period of 1986 to 2003 (analysed in *Attitudes to Social Justice*, Gooby, 2005). In 2003, a majority of those interviewed believed 'there is quite a lot of real poverty in Britain today'. However, the proportion holding this view had declined since the early 1990s. Likewise, the proportion of people who think that poverty is growing has fallen, from 68 per cent in the early 1990s to 35 per cent by 2003.
- MORI included a standard question on 'the important issues facing Britain' in its monthly omnibus survey. In 1997–8 the percentage who identified poverty and inequality as a priority was located in the band between seven and ten per cent. By 2004, the range had fallen to between three and six per cent (MORI, 2004).
- However, if people are asked whose wages they think government should supplement, support is much stronger for helping those with children than it is for either single adults or couples without children. In 2003, 66% and 59% respectively thought that government should top up the wages of

lone parents and couples with children. Only 26% thought the same policies should be applied to couples with no children (Gooby, IPPR, 2005).

Research findings

Outcomes for children across the life course

There is a wealth of international evidence about the relationship between poverty and outcomes in childhood, youth and adulthood. UNICEF report that:

“Evidence from many countries persistently shows that children who grow up in poverty are more vulnerable: specifically, they are more likely to be in poor health, to have learning and behavioural difficulties, to underachieve at school, to become pregnant at too early an age, to have lower skills and aspirations, to be low paid, unemployed, and welfare dependent”

(UNICEF, 2007)

As with other aspects of the family reviewed in this paper, research has also focused on the extent of the causal relationship between poverty and outcomes.

Ermisch et al (2001) used longitudinal UK data to explore adolescent and adult outcomes which link to experiences of childhood poverty.

Looking first at outcomes in adolescence, they found that poverty was associated with:

- Lower self-esteem,
- Lower likelihood of planning to marry,
- A higher likelihood of believing health was a matter of luck

- Higher rates of truancy
- A higher likelihood of planning to leave school at 16 (and this factor was associated with the reality of leaving school at 16)

These findings were not sensitive to the measure of poverty used, and remained when child-specific measures were taken into account.

In terms of adulthood, poverty was associated with:

- Earlier age of leaving home
- Lower educational achievements (especially for males)
- Higher likelihood of economic inactivity
- Early age of childbearing for women

There was also some evidence in relation to physical and psychological health outcomes although this evidence was less clear.

Lower levels of parental education and experience of living in a non-intact family were factors which were also associated with some of the above outcomes in adulthood.

Further analysis that attempted to take account of unobserved variables through sibling comparisons generally upheld the above findings.

There were also some important timing effects, identifying potentially different impacts of experience of poverty in the pre-school, primary school and secondary school periods. As a result Ermisch et al stress the importance of being aware of the potential impact of poverty throughout childhood and adolescence, and of the timing of interventions aimed at reducing this impact.

Other UK studies have also found evidence of the impact of poverty on a range of outcomes in later life. Hobcraft and Kiernan (2001) found that childhood poverty and teenage motherhood were both independently associated with adult outcomes. Blanden and Gregg (2004) found that

household income does have some impact on educational outcomes for children, even when controlling for other factors.

Research has also identified an intergenerational transmission of poverty (Gregg et al, 1999; Blandon and Gibbons, 2006).

Children and young people's experiences of poverty in childhood

In addition to this evidence on the medium- to long-term outcomes of poverty, a separate body of research has explored the impact of poverty on children's everyday experiences during childhood. A meta-analysis of qualitative studies of children living in material disadvantage (Attree, 2006) that met pre-determined quality criteria found childhood experience of poverty as having profound social costs and an effect on their aspirations for the future.

In relation to social costs, an important theme was its effects on friendships and social inclusion:

- Some children felt embarrassed by their circumstances, especially where their social activities were restricted by low family income (Roker, 1998).
- Children described practical difficulties, including having access to transport and in pursuing friendships and social activities (Davis and Ridge, 1997; Ridge, 2002).
- For others, fear of social exclusion was linked to concern with 'keeping up appearances' and potential bullying (Middleton et al, 1994; Daly and Leonard, 2002). Social acceptance for many children, especially amongst older age groups, meant being able to dress similarly to others in their social circle, wearing brand-name clothes and shoes, for example. Failure to keep up with fashionable trends was met with verbal abuse, teasing or bullying from others.

In response, children adopted what Attree (2006) describes as 'coping strategies'. These included:

- Persuading their parents to provide pocket money or brand name clothes by using “begging, repetition of requests, bribery and bargaining – for example, offering help with chores in exchange for money” (Middleton et al, 1994; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Ridge, 2002). The success of their strategies was mixed and limited by available household income.
- Appealing to relatives and wider kin for cash or gifts (Middleton et al, 1994; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Backett-Milburn et al, 2003). This type of support is dependent on contact with kinship networks (Daly and Leonard, 2002). Ghate and Hazel (2002) note that the drawbacks of receiving support may be interference in family life, loss of privacy and expectations of reciprocity.
- For older children, taking part-time employment to ease their families’ financial situations. Children used their wages either to contribute directly to household incomes, to buy desired items, or to subsidise the costs of leisure activities (Middleton et al, 1994; Roker, 1998; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Ridge, 2002). But in some disadvantaged areas employment opportunities are limited (Daly and Leonard, 2002); there is some evidence that children from low income families work longer than their peers and receive lower rates of pay (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999); and for a number of children increases in earning from paid work were accompanied by a reduction in pocket money (Roker, 1998).

An additional theme that emerged from the meta-analysis was children’s expectations for the future, with “evidence... that disadvantage can lead to the perception that economic and social limitations are ‘natural’ and normal, thus impacting on children’s life expectations (Middleton et al, 1994; Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002). There is a suggestion that “children can become resigned to living in poverty” (p61) (although arguably this could also be interpreted as being adaptive to their current circumstances and of positive relationships with their parents). Attree (2006) connects this with children’s

decisions to reduce demands on their parents if they felt they were struggling to make ends meet (Roker, 1998; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Backett-Milburn et al, 2003) and concludes that this may impact on their participation in social and educational activities. While this may be affected by their reduced demands on their parents, it is clear that is also fundamentally linked to the costs involved and the availability of funds within the family.

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2. Divorce and parental conflict

Introduction

The majority of UK children are still raised by both their biological parents. However, with the growth in divorce that has occurred not only in the UK but in all European and other Western societies in recent decades more and more children are experiencing the break-up of their parents' marriage, more are spending part of their childhoods in lone-parent families (typically a lone-mother family), and these families frequently convert into step-families, formed through cohabitation or re-marriage. A substantial proportion of children are now born to cohabiting parents (25 per cent) and these unions have a higher breakdown rate than marital unions. Additionally, a growing proportion of UK children are being born to parents who are not living together: around 15 per cent of children born in recent years were in this position. In 2005, in Britain 26 percent of families with children were lone parent families. The great majority were lone mother families 24 per cent and 2 per cent were lone father families (Living in Britain, 2005). The most recent estimate for step-families is from the 2001 Census, when it was estimated that 10 per cent of couple families with children were step-families.

Information on the differing family circumstances of children and time spent in different family settings is rarely collected. Furthermore, even though children are profoundly affected by changes in their family settings there is very little direct information on children's views and perceptions of these changes.

What follows is a brief examination of some of the effects changes in family composition have had on the life-courses of children as they move through childhood and into adulthood. Most of the literature to date relates to parental divorce and separation. For ease of description divorce is used as an inclusive term to cover family dissolution more generally. The picture that has emerged from the research literature is that there are factors that may

begin to influence children long before their parents separate, effects that continue through the divorce itself and far beyond.

Research findings

How does parental divorce impact on children's lives?

Amato and Keith (1991) summarised the results of over 90 studies and showed that children with divorced parents “**on average**” are worse off than those with continuously married parents. These children tend to have less academic success, they exhibit more conduct problems, are more likely to suffer depression and distress, have lower self esteem, tend to have fewer friends and less social support from their peers and also have weaker emotional bonds with their mothers and fathers

The “crisis” period

Following their parent's separation, children frequently go through what has come to be termed a “**crisis period**” within which children demonstrate a variety of difficulties. Behaviour problems increase at home, worries and anxieties are more prevalent, self-esteem may be affected, performance at school declines, and behaviour problems are also reported by teachers (Emery, 1988, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Two or three years after divorce parents and children have begun to adjust and the situations improve. Nevertheless, on average children and young people in these families continue to exhibit more adjustment difficulties than those in non-divorced families.

What are the processes by which children are affected by recent parental separation?

Three dimensions have been identified in the literature these are: marital conflict; diminished parenting by custodial mothers; and the role of non-custodial fathers.

- **Marital conflict** is the most extensively studied family dynamic, which has shown there to be marked negative consequences for children particularly related to conduct disturbances in boys especially, and possibly to depression in girls.
- **Diminished parenting** refers to the custodial mothers' decline in effective discipline and consistent responsiveness during the crisis period following divorce. Poor parenting is also related to marital conflict. After separation and divorce, custodial mothers are preoccupied and distressed due to all the changes in their lives, economic pressures, lone parenting, and for some, continued conflict with an ex-spouse. Custodial mothers tend not to be adequately responsive when their children need nurturance and support; they are also more likely to be irritable and to combine overreaction to children's misbehaviour with failure to set appropriate disciplinary limits.
- **The role of the non-custodial father** is very important to the adjustment of children soon after divorce. Short term studies find that high father involvement after marital disruption (provided fathers are psychologically healthy themselves) is related to healthy child development (Hetherington & Hagan, 1986). There is a marked decrease in contact between the non-custodial fathers and their children in the year or so following divorce but after this initial drop the proportions retaining contact remains relatively steady (Bradshaw et al 1999). In Britain, a Department of Constitutional Affairs Study carried out in 2003 showed that after three years, 28 per cent of children had no contact with their father (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). Studies also show that frequency of contact is unrelated either to the sex or age of children. But, it was strongly influenced by new family ties. Contact is most frequent where both natural parents had not (yet) established a new union. Contact was less and more infrequent where both parents had entered a new union.

Do children know why their parents separate?

In the ALSPAC study, 23 per cent of children said no one talked to them about separation, 44 per cent said their mothers talked to them and 17 per cent said both parents talked to them (Dunn et al 2001) however it is noteworthy that only 5 per cent felt they were fully informed, and 45 per cent said they were told it a simple statement with no explanation. This is of particular concern as understanding why parents have separated can buffer against stress in children who experience parental divorce (Pryor and Rogers, 2001).

Do children see any gains to parental separation?

Separation and its attending upheavals is not a time when children are likely to see positive elements to their parents separating. An exception to this might be when high levels of conflict are reduced by the separation. In time some advantages can emerge with children forming close and strong relationships with their mother. This seems to be especially apparent in the first two years after separation and is mentioned by adolescents in particular (Pryor and Rogers, 2001).

Family life prior to divorce

Although the economic, social and emotional situation after a divorce play an important part in children's adjustment after divorce, it has also been shown that family life before divorce is also an important influence. Studies using British and American national longitudinal survey data have shown that long before parents separate, there are observable differences in the behaviour of their children as compared with children in marriages that do not break-up (Cherlin **et al** 1991 and Elliott and Richards, 1991). For example, (Cherlin and colleagues et al 1991), found that approximately 50% of the behaviour and academic problems seen in boys after divorce had existed years before the parents separated, (and a similar but less pronounced pattern was found for girls). The results from these studies suggest that divorce should be seen as a long-term process which impacts on children prior to separation,

possibly emanating from marital conflict and family dysfunction, both of which are significant factors in children's behaviour problems (Rutter, 1989).

How do children differ in the longer term?

Longitudinal studies from a range of countries have shown, that as a group, children who experience the break-up of their parent's marriage relative to those who do not, have:

- Lower educational attainment, lower incomes, are more likely to be unemployed and to be in less prestigious occupations in adult life than their contemporaries brought up by both parents (Dronkers, 1995, Jonsson and Gahler, 1997, McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994, Elliot and Richards, 1991 and Greenberg and Wolf, 1982).
- Young women who have experienced parental divorce are more likely than their peers to commence sexual relations earlier, to cohabit or marry at young ages, to bear children in their teens and to conceive and bear children outside wedlock (Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997) to have less traditional marital values (Buchanan and Brinke, 1997), and men and women from disrupted families are in turn more likely to experience the break-up of their own marriage (Kiernan and Cherlin, 1999).
- A small minority of young adults also develop serious mental health problems associated with parental divorce (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan, 1995). Additionally, the offspring from divorced families also have higher levels of alcohol consumption and problem drinking (Pryor and Rogers, 2001).

Why should the effects of divorce persist?

A number of explanations have been suggested as to why the effects of divorce persist including: loss of economic resources, loss of parental resources and family stress (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994 and Amato and Booth, 1991).

Economic hardship:

With divorce there is frequently a loss of economic resources and for some severe economic deprivation (Jarvis and Jenkins, 1997). Even children from relatively advantaged backgrounds experience a loss of economic resources when their parents live apart.

In Britain the majority of lone mothers rely on state benefits or very low incomes to support themselves and their children (DWP, 2007). Such limited finances may affect a child's school attainment in that many lone mothers may not be able to afford the toys, books, sports equipment, home computers and other goods that can aid school success (see Middleton and Ashworth, 1997 for detailed study on spending on children). Limited income may also mean that lone-mother families are more likely to be living in areas with poorer quality schools. Moreover, children living with lone mothers may leave school early to seek employment to assist with the family finances or even work long hours whilst still at school to compensate for lack of family finances to fund their own needs and social activities. Low educational attainment and early entry into the labour market in turn increases the likelihood of low occupational attainment, low incomes, unemployment and state dependency.

Many studies have shown that lower levels of economic resources explain some of the difference in the well-being of children (particularly their educational attainment) from divorced families compared with those from continually married families (Rogers and Pryor, 1998).

Divorce is also associated with a decline in the quantity and quality of contact between children and their non-residential parent, in the main their father, and the mother may also be constrained in the time and energy they can devote to their children, particularly if they have to take on paid employment or increase their hours of work. Reductions in parental resources, such as the amount of attention, supervision and support they can give to their children may increase the likelihood of academic failure and behaviour problems. The loss of parental role models may also reduce the learning of

social skills required for the successful management of occupational and marital roles in later life.

Quality of parenting

The quality of parenting a child receives is one of the best predictors of children's emotional and social well-being (Hetherington and Climpeneel, 1992).

Many lone parents find it more difficult to function effectively as parents. Compared with continuously married parents, on average, they tend to have fewer rules, are harsher in their discipline and are more inconsistent in disciplining their children. Many of these deficits in parenting frequently arise from the difficulties in making ends meet with limited financial resources and trying to raise children without the assistance of the other biological parent. Many research studies have linked poor parenting to a variety of negative outcomes for children- including poor academic achievement, emotional problems, conduct problems, low self-esteem and problems forming and maintaining social relationships (O'Connor and Scott, forthcoming). Lone mothers are also more likely to suffer from depression, which can detract from effective parenting. The role of the non-resident father is also important. Children with involved fathers have higher academic achievement and fewer emotional and conduct problems. Children thrive when their parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship. However, cooperative parenting is not the norm in these families. Many parents over time disengage and communicate little with one another (especially if they re-partner) and at best children living in lone mother families experience is parallel parenting rather than co-operative parenting (Amato and Gilbreth 1999).

Exposure to stress:

Children who experience the separation of their parents tend to be more exposed to more stressful experiences and circumstances than are children living with continuously married parents.

Economic hardship, inconsistent parenting and the loss of contact with a parent can be stressful and observing conflict between parents is also stressful. Emotional distress can result in reduced functioning in school and in the home. The addition of a step parent can also be a stressful change, and if subsequent partnerships dissolve, children are exposed to more stressful transitions. Indeed, studies indicate that the more transitions a child experiences when growing up can be a good predictor of behavioural and emotional problems in adolescence and young adulthood (Rogers and Pryor, 1998).

As well as these economic and social stressors there are family stressors that may put a major strain on children. Many studies have shown that parental conflict prior to and during separation and post-separation (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch, 1996) can have a negative impact on children's psychological well-being. Accompaniments to divorce such as moving house, changing schools, and loss of contact with paternal grandparents and other kin are also stressful for children. Nevertheless, children vary in their responses to stress and adversity: some children may be harmed and carry the legacy into adulthood, others may be more resilient, whilst others may show initial difficulties and subsequently adjust and recover (Rutter, 1989, Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992, Garmezy, 1991).

Vulnerability and resiliency

It goes without saying that children may differ in their susceptibility to parental divorce and its repercussions. Some children will be more vulnerable and others will be more resilient. Such differences may stem from temperament, intellectual and other personal resources, and the availability of support from other family members and others.

Factors that facilitate adjustment

This is a somewhat under researched topic in Britain but there are research studies from the US and some data for Britain that provide information on factors that facilitate a child's adjustment to divorce.

- Children with active coping skills (such as problem solving and gathering social support) tend to adjust to divorce more quickly than those who rely on avoidance and distraction as coping mechanisms.
- Having social support from peers and grandparents. Extended family members, especially grandparents are a vital source of social support for children. For example, one study of British children (Dunn et al, 2001) found that grandparents or other relatives were the group of people most frequently turned to by the children, mothers came third on the list of confidants at an intimate level.
- Access to therapeutic interventions which are more common in the USA than here and the inclusion of children in mediation procedures.
- Substantial shared care between parents has been shown to be a positive arrangement for children as long as parents exercise maturity, cooperate and consider the development needs of their child, and provide emotionally available parenting in a climate of low conflict.

How large are the effects of parental separation?

As we have noted children from divorced families do differ from children raised with both parents on a range of outcomes covering the social, economic and psychological domains. Typically children from divorced families have from one and half to double the risk of an adverse outcome compared to children from non-divorced families (Rogers and Pryor, 1998) and surprisingly the size of the effects have not changed as divorce has become more frequent (Sigle-Rushton et al). Although the magnitude of the overall differences between children from intact and divorced families are modest, such differences can still be of great importance at the population

level in terms of implications for services, benefit regimes and the social costs of poor outcomes for such children. This is especially true in recent times because of the greater proportions of children who are experiencing parental separation.

Remarriage

After divorce many mothers re-marry or re-partner. Adding a step father to the household usually improves a children's standard of living. Moreover, in a step family two adults are available to monitor children's behaviour, provide supervision and assist children with problems. For such reasons it might be expected that generally children would be better off in step-families than in lone mother families. Studies consistently show however that children in step-families exhibit more problems than children in continuously married parents and have about the same level of problems as children of lone mothers. In the main it appears that although children in step-families may be better off financially, on other dimensions there is little difference between children in lone mother families and in step-families (Pryor and Rogers, 2001).

Parental conflict

Most studies that have examined the effects of divorce on children have compared children living with a lone mother family with a broad group of children living with continuously married parents. However, some two parent families function better than others. So for example, marriages where there is chronic, and overt conflict may well not be a good environment in which to raise children. There are a few US studies that have compared children living with divorced parents with those living with two married but discordant parents. These studies found that children in high conflict households experience many of the same problems, as do children of divorced parents. Long term studies carried out by (Amato and Booth, 1997) have shown that

the effects of divorce vary with the degree of marital discord that precedes divorce.

Scholars have found parental conflict to have an impact on child well-being that is distinct from the impact of divorce and shown conflict to be a key predictor of children's emotional and behavioural problems, social competence and difficulties at school. Children respond to parental conflict in different ways. Some intervene or mediate, others stay out of the way. Some become difficult and aggressive as they imitate their parents' behaviour or try to distract their parents from arguing. Others become withdrawn and quiet. As with divorce, children with coping strategies that involve seeking support from siblings, peers and other adults, seem to adjust better.

Reynolds (2001) distinguishes various aspects of conflict that can be particularly distressing for children: when conflict is frequent and intense; disputes are full of physical and verbal aggression; parents treat one another with quiet contempt or the 'silent, hostile treatment'; one parent withdraws during an argument or walks out; disagreements are about the child.

Parental conflict can indirectly affect child well-being when the parent-child relationship is undermined and parenting techniques become less warm, sensitive, consistent and effective. It can also upset the parent-child relationship as children come to expect their parents to behave in a hostile and aggressive way towards them.

If parents exhibit high levels of conflict children appear to be better off in the long run if their parents split up rather than stay together providing the conflict does not persist. Ongoing conflict after separation is at least as damaging for children as pre-divorce conflict. But when parents exhibit relatively little overt conflict children appear to be better off if their parents stay together (Amato and Booth, 1997). In other words children may be particularly at risk when low conflict marriages end in divorce. Children in these circumstances often viewed the separation as unexpected, inexplicable and unwelcome.

Main messages from the existing research

- Substantial proportions of children are affected by parental discord and divorce.
- The rise in divorce has lowered the average well-being of children both in childhood and in their adulthood. The separation and divorce of parents is not a single event in the lives of children. It is a process that begins, for many, years before the divorce and has repercussions that reverberate into adulthood.
- The effects of divorce are modest rather than strong reflecting the heterogeneity of experiences of children. In that some children growing up in families with both biological parents are also exposed to stressful circumstances such as conflict, poverty, violence, poor parenting and mental illness that increase the risk of lower well-being amongst these children; and correspondingly, some children with separated parents cope well, especially if parents engage in cooperative co-parenting.

What of the future?

The rise in cohabitation and the known relative fragility of such unions compared with marriages perhaps signals that there will be more partnership dissolution and turnover in the future. But, the saliency of this for public policy will depend on the positioning of children within the partnership history. There is also robust evidence for all European nations that children who experience parental divorce, when they become adults are in their turn more at risk of seeing their own marriages and partnerships dissolve, which suggests that if parental separation continues to echo through to the next generation then more and more children will experience parental separation, and the attending social and economic disadvantages that can emanate from it (Kiernan, 2004). This speaks to the formulation and enactment of policies and practices that foster good parental relationships and temper the fall out from discord and divorce.

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3. Children's relationships with the family

The next sections section cover issues in relation to micro-level relationships within the family. The first section looks at the general issues of parent-child relationships. This is followed by two brief sections looking at child maltreatment and at the role of fathers respectively.

Parent-child relationships

The focus in this section is on the connection between parent-child relationships and children's well-being. O'Connor and Scott (2007) recommend the use of the term 'parent-child relationships' rather than 'parenting' because, amongst other things, the latter term implies a 'top-down unidirectional process', which as we will discuss later is incorrect. We follow this terminology here.

Attitudes

There is considerable attitudes research on types of parenting approaches, what informs these practices and how parenting impacts on wider society. The State of the Nation's Parent Survey (2006) found that British parents are embracing the more disciplinarian techniques espoused by parenting programmes such as Supernanny. The survey polled 3,388 parents on parenting issues:

- Almost half of those surveyed agreed that parents are to blame for their children's lack of discipline and respect.
- 76% believe that today's parents are less strict than before
- 67% felt that parents don't spend enough time with their children

- 73% said that good behaviour was more important than making children feel good about themselves

The popularity and influence of parenting programmes was supported by other MORI research (2006) with almost three-quarters (72%) of parents with children aged under 16 have watched at least one parenting programme and 55% of all adults have watched at least one parenting programme. Parenting programmes are directly influencing parenting behaviour: more than eight in ten parents (83%) who have watched parenting programmes found a technique from the programmes helpful to them.

A failure to bring up children properly is felt to be the main cause of anti-social behaviour (MORI, 2006). From interviews with a representative sample of 2,048 adults (aged 16 and over) across Great Britain, the large majority believes that parents should be held responsible for the bad behaviour of their children and be made to take help if their child is involved in anti-social behaviour. Two-thirds of parents say they would personally find help from outside their friends and family useful in dealing with difficult or troublesome behaviour of their children.

Young people

A 2000 survey of over 2000 teenagers (aged 11-16 years) attitudes to parenting (MORI for National Family and Parenting Institute) found that despite the difficulties associated with parenting teenagers, three-quarters of the young people interviewed said that their parents were always there for them when they needed them, and two-thirds said they felt loved and cared for. 59% said they get on very well with their parents. More than half (56%) found it easy to communicate with their parents, but one in five argued a lot with their parents. There were more positive responses across all these issues from 'advantaged' children. Boys were less likely to give a positive view of their relationship with their parents than were girls. Younger children were much more positive than were older children, and there seemed to be a turning point at age 13.

As with the 2059 parents surveyed, the majority of young people recommended positive approaches to managing children's behaviour, using rewards and reasoning, rather than punishment like smacking.

Young people's views on raising happy children differed from those of their parents in three other significant respects:

- Seven out of ten young people, in contrast to only a third of adults, said that it was important that parents should get on well together.
- Nearly half of young people said that parents' self esteem and confidence influenced their capacity to raise happy children, compared with one-sixth of parents.
- Nearly three-quarters of young people, but only 41% of parents, considered that children feeling listened to and understood was important.

About half of the young people agreed that education and counselling could help with difficult family relationships, with slightly fewer (43%) favouring the introduction of parenting education in schools.

Research findings

The section primarily consists of a brief summary of a literature review by O'Connor and Scott (2007) undertaken for Joseph Rowntree Foundation entitled *Parenting and Outcomes for Children*.

Risks of a 'one size fits all' approach

The Assessment Framework (see also Section 1) divides its 'Parents & Carers' domain into three broad elements:

- **Basic care, ensuring safety and protection:** The extent to which the baby, child or young person's physical needs are met and they are protected from harm or danger, including self-harm.

- **Emotional warmth and stability:** Provision of emotional warmth in a stable family environment, giving the baby, child or young person a sense of being valued.
- **Guidance, boundaries and stimulation:** Enabling the baby, child or young person to regulate their own emotions and behaviour while promoting the baby, child or young person's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and stimulation and promoting social opportunities.

This framework therefore describes a fundamental set of needs at a very broad level which are seen as being relevant to all children.

Nevertheless, the universal nature of children's needs within the family should not be taken to imply that there is a particular style of parenting, or of shaping parent-child relationships, which is also universally applicable. O'Connor & Scott caution against a 'one size fits all' approach and stress that positive and constructive parent-child relationships might need to vary according to:

- **Age.** Whilst some qualities of interaction apply at all ages – warmth/support and conflict/hostility; others such as control in middle years and monitoring (rather than control) in adolescence may need to differ.
- **Environmental context** – for example there is some evidence that parental monitoring might be particularly important, and more effective, for young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods who may face greater risks within their local environment.
- **Family form.** Relationships between step-parents and their step-children tend to be less affectively intense both positively and negatively
- **Cultural or ethnic group** – some research has suggested that the meaning of parenting behaviour may vary across cultures.

- **Personality.** An example here is that children with anxious natures may not be helped by an anxious or over-protective approach by parents.

Thus whilst children's needs may be broadly similar, the most effective ways of meeting these needs through parent-child relationships will vary according to characteristics and context. This point has important implications for any recommendations the panel might wish to make about parenting styles and parenting support.

Key issues

O'Connor & Scott identify three key issues which permeate the literature on parent-child relationships: causality, context and convertibility

By "cause", we mean the determination of what is central to understanding how parent-child relationships directly or indirectly influence child well-being; by "context" we refer to the degree of generalisability of findings across diverse populations and settings and the degree to which processes operating within families are influenced and given meaning by the distinct culture in which they are embedded; by "convertibility", we refer to the degree to which, and the processes by which, findings from research can be converted to interventions at the individual family or community level.

(Page 6)

Further discussion of these issues follows.

Theoretical models

They also identify three theoretical models which may help in accounting for the link between parent-child relationships and children's well-being.

- **Social learning theory** - which focuses on the way in which children's behaviour is learned directly or indirectly through their experiences. This approach implies interventions which support parents modelling positive and consistent behaviour towards their children.

- **Attachment theory** – which focuses primarily on how secure parent-child attachment can protect children from harm and provide them with a sense of emotional security.
- **Parenting style typologies** – this is not so much a theoretical approach as a way of categorising parent-child relationships along two key dimensions – warmth/conflict and control. This two-dimensional model gives rise to four types of parenting – authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful – which have proved to have strong correlations with different outcomes for children.

Whilst these approaches have been developed separately, there is a good deal of common ground between them. All three emphasise, to varying degrees, the three key aspects of parent-child relationships as identified above in the Assessment Framework – i.e. basic care, security and protection; emotional warmth and stability; and guidance, boundaries and stimulation.

Links between parent-child relationships and children’s well-being

As O’Connor & Scott identify there is now a huge body of literature which provides strong evidence of a link between the quality of parent-child relationships and children’s well-being including:

- Externalising problems – aggression and delinquency
- Depression, anxiety and other ‘internalising’ problems
- Cognitive and educational outcomes – authoritative parenting linked with higher school achievement; secure attachment linked with achievement in secondary school; parental involvement with school linked with achievement
- Social competence and peer relationships (based on attachment theory and social learning theory)

- Self-esteem, identity and self-concept (variously linked to secure attachment and authoritative parenting style)
- Risky behaviours such as substance use
- Risk of physical injury (adolescents as well as younger children) and general health).
- Longer-term outcomes such as quality and stability of partner relationships in adulthood.

The authors conclude that:

Given the volume of studies reported to date, there seems little benefit in supporting further research whose sole aim is to ask the question, “what is the association between parent-child relationship quality and child outcome?”

However this strong evidence of a link does not in itself prove causality. The majority of the research has been based on cross-sectional data, and there are far fewer studies which have explored causality through longitudinal analysis.

In fact, three challenges to causality have been put forward:

- Connections are partly genetically mediated
- The effect of parent-child relationship quality is confounded with other influences in the broader social context. Thus it is necessary to understand the circumstances and environments in which the connections may be most important which links to the key issue of ‘context’ identified earlier.
- The direction of effects between parent-child relationship quality and child outcome is bi-directional.

O'Connor and Scott conclude that there is some evidence in support of all three challenges.

On the third point, there has been attention in recent years to the possibility of two-way links between parenting behaviour and young people's behaviour.

A study by Reitz et al (2004) using self-reported data by 13- and 14-year-olds at two points in time found evidence both of parenting effects on adolescent problem behaviour (internalising and externalising) and of adolescent effects on parenting behaviour.

Reitz et al also cite other recent studies which have shown reciprocal relationships between parental behaviour and children's externalising (Kerr and Stattin, 2003) and internalising (Buist et al, 2004) behaviours.

Similarly, using longitudinal data on 496 adolescent girls, Huh et al (2006) found that externalising behaviour and substance use by adolescents was a more consistent predictor of parenting than the reverse.

Research on this topic still seems at a fairly early stage of development but some of the findings summarised above are sufficient to cast doubt on assumptions of one-directional causality between parenting and children's problem behaviour.

Intervention studies

O'Connor & Scott then go on to review studies of parenting intervention. .

They conclude that the intervention studies they review

'add powerful evidence that parenting has important effects on children. In particular, the studies where parents alone were seen are persuasive. [and] show that experimentally altering parenting leads to substantial measurable benefits for the child, across a range of functioning domains that include attachment security, social and antisocial behaviour, ability to concentrate, and academic achievements, notably reading. These studies prove fairly conclusively that genetic studies that show pervasive antisocial

behaviour has as much as 100% heritability are misleading if interpreted to mean that the parenting environment does not have major effect on children under everyday conditions.'

They identify a shift in understanding of best practice in parenting interventions, with a move *'away from a strictly behavioural approach'* and an increasing *'emphasis on making the interventions accessible and desirable to a wide audience of parents'*.

Finally, they emphasise the need for evaluative research to go beyond a simple approach of *'what works?'* towards a realist context-sensitive evaluation model of *'what works with which people in which circumstances?'* This conclusion echoes the cautionary note earlier regarding the risks of a *'one size fits all'* approach to parent-child relationships.

O'Connor and Scott's conclusions are echoed in the findings of a literature review of the international evidence on *'What works in parenting support?'* commissioned by the DfES and conducted by researchers at the Policy Research Bureau (Moran et al, 2004).

The review identifies 17 key learning points about the characteristics of parenting support interventions which evidence suggests have a positive impact. For example:

Behavioural interventions that focus on specific parenting skills and practical 'take-home tips' for changing more complex parenting behaviours and impacting on child behaviours

However, Moran et al note a large number of gaps in knowledge at present. Amongst these the following two overarching issues were identified:

- A this stage there is relatively little UK evidence on effectiveness and it is not known to what extent interventions which have been shown to work in other countries are transferable to the UK context.

- There is also a gap in knowledge about ‘what doesn’t work?’ and also regarding ‘what works for whom under what circumstances?’.

As a result, the reviewers conclude that:

Research indicates that there are many families in the community who could benefit from parenting support in one form or another, although attracting parents and engaging them with programmes remains a challenge. Unfortunately, in the UK the burgeoning number of parenting support programmes in recent years has not been matched by a rise in the number of high quality quantitative and qualitative studies carried out to evaluate them. Consequently the evaluation literature only provides us with a partial picture of ‘what works’, and only partial understanding of why some programmes work better than others

The review identifies a number of key messages for national policy, which are reproduced verbatim below:

- *Parenting support benefits families, and this review has clearly shown the potential benefits that may be realised through continuing investment in this type of social intervention*
- *Many parents need support at some point in their parenting career and efforts to ‘normalise’ access to support as a universal right seem likely to generate strong benefits. The message that it is not unusual to need support from time to time needs to be conveyed in policy rhetoric, to help increase rates of access, especially at critical points for early intervention*
- *There needs to be a consistent message about supporting parents delivered across the board, reflecting the wider ecological context of parenting, from the provision of individual programmes to the implementation of national policies. The broad thrust of current policy in the UK appears to be in tune with this, but the impact of new policy initiatives needs to be monitored constantly to ensure that policy in one area does not inadvertently pull against policy in another.*

- *Across the board, in order to better support parents, policy needs to embody an evidence-based model of parenting linked to good outcomes for children, (e.g. encouraging authoritative, non-punitive parenting rather than harsh parenting; promoting and enabling fathers' involvement in childcare)*
- *Results show time and time again that it is difficult for stressed families to benefit from parenting programmes when they face multiple disadvantages, and thus policies that reduce everyday stresses in the lives of families (including poverty, unemployment, poor health, housing and education) will support parents in caring for their children*
- *We need to recognise that there will always be a minority of parents who cannot or will not benefit from parenting support services. This does not mean a service is 'all bad', or that anyone is necessarily to blame. The media should be helped to understand this better*
- *It is questionable whether punishing those who fail to benefit from parenting support with draconian sanctions is consistent with promoting better outcomes for their children*
- *It will be vital for the future of this field that government invests in building capacity and skills in the social care workforce and related professions that provide parenting support. Supporting families without compromising their autonomy is a demanding and delicate job, and highly skilled and appropriately trained staff will get better results.*

Moran et al, 2004: 10)

Child maltreatment

Research findings

Definitions

Child maltreatment is an umbrella term which covers all forms of abuse and neglect. UK government guidance describes maltreatment as follows:

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

(HM Government, 2006: 37)

Although there are differences in definition, the term 'maltreatment' is commonly divided into four categories - physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect - and this is the set of categories used in official literature in the UK. There is also substantial overlap between these categories and that many maltreated children experiences more than one form of abuse and neglect.

Moreover it is important to recognise that, as Creighton (2004) points out child abuse is:

'a culturally defined phenomenon ... Parental behaviours towards children, that are deemed to be unacceptable, are continually evolving within societies'

(Creighton, 2004):

Prevalence

Official UK statistics published annually provide information on reported and registered cases of maltreatment. The latest statistics (DfES, 2006) show that there were 26,400 children and young people on child protection

registers at 31st March 2006. Of new registrations during the previous 12 months, 43% of cases had been categorised as neglect; 21% as emotional abuse; 16% as physical abuse; 8% as sexual abuse; and the remainder as mixed category or unknown.

- A second source of information about the prevalence of maltreatment comes from self-reported surveys. The most substantial piece of work in the UK to date is a study by the NSPCC (Cawson et al, 2000).

Two patterns of abusive relationships were identified - continual abuse since early childhood, and onset of abuse during adolescence. Over half (56%) of the young people who had experienced violent treatment by parents/carers said that this started at the age of nine or over.

The impact of maltreatment

Experience of child maltreatment has been shown to be connected with a wide range of negative outcomes during childhood, adolescence and later in life.

A few illustrative examples from a fairly extensive literature are as follows.

In terms of emotional abuse and neglect, Spertus et al (2003) found that childhood experiences of these forms of maltreatment were associated with increased anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress and physical indicators of well-being in a sample of adult women, controlling for other forms of maltreatment and lifetime trauma.

Lansford et al (2002) found that early child physical maltreatment was associated with a range of internalising and externalising behaviours (including school attendance problems, aggression, social problems, anxiety and depression) when controlling for family and child characteristics also associated with maltreatment.

Roberts et al (2004) found that, after adjusting for other experiences of adversity in childhood, sexual abuse was associated with a range of negative

outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, including teenage pregnancy, poorer psychological well-being and negative parenting behaviours.

Ystgaard et al (2004) found that both physical and sexual abuse were '*significantly and independently associated with repeated suicidal behaviour*'

Finally in a recent self-report study of multiple forms of maltreatment, Arata et al (2007) found support for an additive model relating maltreatment to negative affect and externalising problems during adolescence. This study also drew attention once again to '*the particularly deleterious effects of neglect and emotional abuse*'.

As Hooper (2002) concludes:

While the impacts of child maltreatment are variable and by no means determined, there is consistent evidence that it both undermines children's well-being in childhood and increases vulnerability to a wide range of problems in later life

Hooper (2002)

The role of fathers

Attitudes

There are conflicting findings on attitudes to the roles of fathers and acceptance of traditional family structures. *Dads on Dads* (2002), a qualitative study by MORI for the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) found that although dads play a range of roles in the family, most still see themselves primarily as the breadwinner. The study found that women's lower average pay is a key factor in maintaining traditional gender roles in many families. Other factors that affect dads' involvement in the family

include a lack of confidence in their own caring skills and a working culture of long and inflexible hours.

Fathers Work and Family Life (Warin, Solomon, Lewis & Langford, 1999) found that fathers are not receiving the support and recognition that they need to combine the role of breadwinner with an active part in home life. The research found that fathers, mothers and their teenage children were overwhelmingly convinced that the main contribution men can make to their families is providing an income. This 'traditional' view of 'providing' fathers and 'caring' mothers is deeply entrenched among young people as well as their parents.

The British Social Attitudes Survey (2002) found that most people believe fathers should do a larger share of childcare (52.2% agreed; 9.7% strongly agreed). It is interesting that a significant minority (25.8%) neither agreed or disagreed with this statement which could be interpreted as showing that this group's current level of childcare involvement is sufficient.

However there are conflicting findings, reported elsewhere in this paper, on attitudes to mothers' roles.

Trends

There is an increase in fathers' involvement in family work emerging in Britain (O'Brien & Shemilt, 2003) – including their care of infants and young children (Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999). This means that the gap between mothers' and fathers' contributions at home is narrowing, although mothers continue to do more. This has been connected to the substantial increase in women's participation in the paid labour market, which has influenced traditionally gendered divisions of responsibility in families (Stanley, 2005).

Changes in family structure have resulted in a growth in lone parent families and stepfamilies. This has created a group of fathers who are detached from

their children at the outset, or who progressively become so, or who are co-resident with other men's children.

Although there is evidence that rates of involvement by non-resident fathers are increasing (for review see O'Brien, 2004a) and some non-resident fathers remain very involved with their children, non-residence is a key predictor of low levels of involvement by fathers (Flouri, 2005a)

Research findings

The research findings in this section are derived from and include extracts from the following key texts:

- Burgess A (2007) *The costs and benefits of active fatherhood. Evidence and insights to inform the development of policy and practice.* A paper prepared by Fathers Direct to inform the DfES/HM Treasury Joint Policy Review on Children and Young People
- Lewis C and Lamb M E (2006) *Fatherhood: connecting strands of diversity across time and space.* Final report submitted to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 16 May 2006.
- O'Brien M (2005) *Shared caring: bringing fathers into the frame.* Manchester, Equal Opportunities Commission.
- Stanley K (Ed) (2007) *Daddy Dearest? Active fatherhood and public policy.* Institute for Public Policy Research.

A number of authors caution that research evidence is indeterminate in relation to the impact of father involvement in children's lives (Flouri, 2005; Featherstone et al, forthcoming, 2007).

Research on fatherhood is highly variable and some of it is subject to failings similar to those raised as problematic in the motherhood literature – e.g. sample sizes are small or unrepresentative, researchers have failed to

control adequately for confounding variables such as mother involvement, causal modelling strategies have not been employed, findings have been derived from only one source (often mothers' reports) (Burgess, 2007).

However, Burgess (2007) adds that despite this, and the challenges inherent in specifically identifying paternal (or maternal) effects, the growing number of longitudinal investigations, together with studies reporting children's perceptions of their parents' influences, provide valuable insight into patterns of influence over time. These studies are helping to build up a powerful picture of patterns of father-child closeness as crucial predictors of later psychological adjustment, although patterns of influence remain to be explored in depth (Lewis and Lamb, 2004).

'Fathers' include both biological and social fathers, and may refer to both resident and non-resident fathers. Research evidence predominantly focuses on resident biological fathers, although there is increasing evidence relating to non-resident biological fathers and social fathers.

Understanding father involvement

Michael Lamb (1987) one of the major experts and writers on fatherhood notes that scholars have generally been ambiguous about what they mean by parental involvement - which makes comparisons across studies and across time problematic. He argues that if we are ever to make progress in assessing whether or not fathers have changed, we must devise a definition that is conceptually clear and comprehensive. The definition that he thinks should be used is one that separates parental involvement into three components: engagement, accessibility and responsibility.

Engagement: is time spent in one to one interaction with a child - whether feeding, helping with homework, or playing ball in the garden.

Accessibility: is a less intense degree of interaction and is the kind of involvement whereby a parent is doing one thing e.g. cooking, watching TV, but is still readily available to respond to the child if the need arises.

Responsibility: has to do with who is accountable for the child's welfare and care. Responsibility includes, for example, making sure the child has clothes to wear, keeping track of dental appointments, parents evenings at school etc.

Lamb noted from his review that fathers become more engaged and accessible but not any more responsible for their children when they have working wives

The impact of father involvement on children

Where involvement is positive

Pleck and Maciadrelli (2004) conducted a systematic review of studies (that controlled for maternal involvement and gathered data from different independent sources) and found 'positive' father involvement associated with a range of desirable outcomes for children and young people. The positive outcomes include:

- Better peer relationships;
- Fewer behaviour problems;
- Lower criminality and substance abuse;
- Higher educational/occupational mobility relative to parents';
- Capacity for empathy;
- Non-traditional attitudes to earning and childcare;
- More satisfying adult sexual partnerships;
- And higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction.

Where involvement is negative

Greater father involvement may not always be positive. Studies show a range of negative developmental outcomes associated with fathers' (and father

figures') poor parenting or psychopathology – which is also the case with mothers:

- Conflict with fathers, fathers' negativity and fathers' harsh or neglectful parenting are strongly associated with children's externalising behaviour, and fathers' harsh parenting has a stronger effect than mothers' on children's aggression.
- A father's own bullying behaviour at school is a risk factor for his child becoming a bully.
- Fathers' antisocial personality behaviour and/or substance abuse correlate with conduct problems and aggression in children and adolescents (studies cited by Phares, 1999; Flouri, 2005).
- Burgess (2007) emphasises that over and above negative developmental outcomes is the pain and suffering experienced by children whose fathers neglect or abuse them, or who neglect or abuse their mothers.

Where there is no involvement

Burgess (2007) points out that 'it has often been argued that no father is better than a bad father' (p40) but draws together the following findings which counter the suggestion:

- Severing father-child relationships entirely, either actively or by default, can result in children demonising or idealising fathers or blaming themselves for their absence.
- Loss or attenuation of the relationship commonly causes children substantial distress, anger or self-doubt.
- Controlling for other factors, absent fatherhood has shown negatively to affect children directly, for example, by contributing to their difficulties with peer relationships, including bullying; and indirectly, via increased maternal stress and reduced income.

- Although in some cases removing the father improves the situation for children, their situation more often becomes worse.

In sum, as Burgess (2007) concludes:

“Father-child relationships – be they positive, negative or lacking, and at any stage in the life of the child, and in all cultural and ethnic communities – have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime. These are present even after controlling for the impact of mother-child relationship”

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