

## **Children's views and experiences of parenting**



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# **Children's views and experiences of parenting**

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# 1 Introduction

Much 'wisdom' has been published about parenting and its impact on children, but only recently has this taken much account of children's own views. Asking children what they think recognises that they are well able to speak for themselves and have unrivalled insights into their own feelings and needs. In terms of parenting and its outcomes, there can be little doubt that children are experts.

The focus of this review is accordingly on research *with* children rather than research *about* children. Based on an examination of the literature and other documentation, consultations with experts in the field and two focus groups with young people, it explores children's accounts of parenting where 'added value' is gained from including young perspectives. It draws out some of the main conclusions from this evidence, identifies unexplored or underdeveloped research questions, and makes observations on research with young people.

## Different research approaches

The studies and other papers we have examined for children's views and their experiences of parenting apply many different methodological strategies and start from varying practical concerns and theoretical bases. They are not easily comparable and, individually, have differing strengths and weaknesses.

There are many reasons for investigating children's views on parenting, and these to some degree dictate the choice of methodology. For example, one common aim has been to get a general picture of children's experiences or thoughts and the factors influencing them. In this case, large-scale investigations of fairly representative population groups can be suitable, particularly if they combine quantitative and qualitative techniques. Another purpose of research has been to discover some of the overlooked needs and concerns that children may have. In this instance, smaller, intensive qualitative enquiries that provide detail on individual perspectives can be highly informative. Indeed, it may even be the 'lone voice' that conveys an important message. On other occasions, research has been about very specific aspects of parenting – such as the impact of family separation or experiences in public care – and targeted samples have provided the most appropriate approach.

Survey questionnaires, one-to-one interviews (structured, semi-structured or unstructured), focus or conversation groups, diaries, detailed case studies,

ethnographic methods, analysis of helpline calls and devised tasks of some kind all have research value in this field. Sometimes studies seeking children's views have included control or comparison groups – important in the assessment of risk factors – but generally they have not. Data collection approaches can also depend on whether the research is about children's real experiences, their expectations about the future, responses to hypothetical situations, or adults' retrospective recall of their childhoods and parenting. Ultimately, of course, the value of any particular study depends on the quality of its conduct, and the way the research data are analysed, interpreted and presented.

Research findings from any perspective that appears sufficiently sound to make a contribution to a picture of children's views and experiences of parenting are brought together in the following chapters. Evidence is reviewed in four main areas:

- parents and families
- families under stress
- the dynamics of family life
- growing up – and becoming parents.

The review makes no claim to be an exhaustive and comprehensive account of the field, but it does attempt to draw out some key findings, issues and messages that seem useful in informing future research.

## 2 A summary of relevant research findings

### Parents and families

#### 'Parents' and the parental role

How children see parents and the parental role is an essential starting point for understanding parenting from young people's point of view.

One key finding is that children do not have a fixed idea of a 'family'. Brannen *et al.* (2000) found that few of the 1,000 11 to 12 year olds they consulted agreed with the notion of a 'proper family'; and not many referred to the nuclear stereotype of two parents and their children. Even 8 to 9 year olds realise that families differ from each other (O'Brien *et al.*, 1996). Children also differ in whether they think of families as restricted to household members or as also including non-resident relatives.

What children say they want most from parents is to be loved and cared for. In Brannen *et al.*'s (2000) study most children said that parental love, emotional security and affective support were the most important things about being a family. Borland *et al.* (1998) reported on two studies conducting interviews and focus groups with a total of just over a hundred 8 to 12 year olds and found that children said they liked to be listened to, taken seriously and valued. Montandon (2001) drew similar conclusions from a study of 11 to 12 year olds ( $n = 67$ ).

Providing support, information and advice has been consistently shown to be a central function of parents, especially mothers (e.g. Balding, 2002; BT/ChildLine, 2002; Madge and Franklin, 2003). This is as true of 6 to 9 year olds (Cullingford, 1997) as of 18 to 24 year olds (Cawson, 2002). Holland *et al.* (1996) demonstrated that diet, sex and the body, smoking, stress, mental health, and accidents and safety are among the topics that family members commonly talk about.

#### Mothers and fathers

Research suggests that many children see mothers and fathers rather differently.

Mayall (2001b), for example, spent time over a period of six to eight weeks with 57 children aged 9 to 10 years. Their accounts of parenthood involved clearly gendered divisions of responsibility: mothers figured more significantly than fathers in their accounts, and while mothers dealt with childcare and home maintenance, fathers were seen as financial providers. Langford *et al.* (2001) found that teenage boys and girls also said they felt closest to their mothers. Fathers were often described as the family disciplinarian, and sometimes as coercive or even threatening. Similar differences have been reported for children living with carers. A survey of 225 (and in-depth study of 47) looked-after children found they commonly viewed female carers as the 'boss' in family decision-making, while male carers set boundaries but were less involved in children's day-to-day activities (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999). An NCH Action for Children (1997) study of 250 children similarly indicated that family finances and discipline were the only activities for which children thought that more fathers than mothers were responsible.

Hendricks (1999) explored what the word 'Dad' meant with 99 children at pre-school, primary and secondary school levels in a New Zealand study employing tasks, interviews and group sessions. Perspectives were generally favourable and fathers were seen as potentially or actually participating in many areas of their children's lives. Children agreed that fathers were 'not okay' if they were not there for their children, poor disciplinarians, abusive or aggressive, or if they involved children in parental disputes. Meanwhile, the main expectations of fathers identified by O'Brien and Jones (1996) in a survey of 600 14 year olds were economic provision, care and love (mentioned particularly by girls), and involvement in the domestic life of families.

Fathers are less likely than mothers to live with their children, and this can affect their involvement in family life. Flouri *et al.* (2004) carried out a survey of more than 2,000 young people aged 11 to 18 (as well as in-depth interviews with a smaller number) and found that although resident fathers scored higher than non-resident fathers on nine different dimensions of fathering (discipline and teaching responsibility; school encouragement; mother support; time and talking; providing; praise and affection; developing talents and future concerns; reading and homework support; and attentiveness), the differences were not enormous. Non-resident fathers were often still rated as the 'main' father figure even if stepfathers were seen as more involved.

### **Lesbian parents**

Tasker and Golombok (1997) carried out a follow-up study of children brought up in lesbian families originally studied in the mid-1970s. The original sample comprised 39 children from lesbian mother families and a comparison group of 39 children from

heterosexual mother families. At the time of the initial study the children's average age was 9.5 years. The follow-up study traced 46 young adults aged between 17 and 35 years. Looking back, most of those who grew up with lesbian mothers were positive about their family life – and noticeably more positive about their mothers' lesbian partners than the comparison group were about their stepfathers. Nor did they seem to have felt more negative than the comparison group about their family identity as they grew up.

### **The importance of parents and families to children**

Research findings are unambiguous in suggesting that parents and families are of central significance in most children's lives. A nationally representative survey of over 2,000 11 to 16 year olds (National Family and Parenting Institute, 2000) found that most teenagers held positive views of their parents and family life. Three-quarters said their parents were always there for them, and only one in five reported any relationship difficulties. Girls were, however, more positive than boys. Findings from Morrow's (1998) study, based on questionnaires and structured activities with 8 to 14 year olds ( $n = 183$ ), demonstrated that parents, especially mothers, are very important to their children. Girls were particularly likely to stress how mothers are 'somebody to talk to'.

Many studies demonstrate the influence of age on relationships. The NFPI survey suggests that younger children report more positive relationships with their parents than older children, and that the turning point is around 13 years. However, a group of 16 to 18 year olds interviewed by Gillies *et al.* (2001) reported that their relationships had become more equal and companionable over the years. Similar conclusions emerged from Langford *et al.*'s (2001) study. One 14 year old described how growing older produced a realisation that parents are just human beings that you could become 'good friends' with. Girls, especially, valued the extra time they spent talking to their mothers, while boys were pleased that parental control had progressively reduced.

Not surprisingly, family relationships can also affect young people's confidence and self-esteem. One report, based on questionnaires returned by over 3,000 girls in response to a newspaper survey (plus 40 additional interviews) suggested that those with confidence, optimism and motivation ('Can-do girls') had more loving parents and communicated better with them than those lacking these characteristics (Katz, 1997). A parallel study of 1,344 boys found that 'Can-do' attitudes were linked to a positive parenting style that was emotionally supportive and involved listening to problems and views (Katz, 1999). It was also associated with families who did

things together – and with highly involved fathers who spent time with their sons and showed an interest in them.

### Children in public care

A significant minority of children spend at least a part of their lives looked after by the local authority, whether fostered, with adoptive parents, or in kinship care placements. It is also apparent that many are able to lead happy lives away from their birth parents. Most of the 96 adopted children studied by Smith and Logan (2004), for instance, appeared happy with relationships in their adoptive families and appreciated the permanence and security they brought. Similarly, 50 young people in kinship care placements, half of whom were of Caribbean or Guyanese ethnic origin, were overwhelmingly positive and frequently said they felt loved, settled and safe (Broad *et al.*, 2001). Interviews with a Scottish sample of 16 young men and 18 young women aged between 15 and 25, a minority of whom were still in care, found they could express positive feelings about their removal from familial neglect or abuse and their entry into residential care where staff were friendly, caring and more like 'a big family' (Barry, 2001a). Young people, nonetheless, did not like having to leave their parents and families. Some also spoke of the strain of infrequent home visits when they felt like strangers in their own house.

Children talk about foster families in much the same way as other families, saying they are good in some ways but less good in others. Although feeling supported, cared for and loved were most important to them, a few of the 150 children aged five who took part in a postal survey said they disliked being in a family that was not their own (Sinclair *et al.*, 2001). Consultation groups with 110 children in social care also identified the importance that young people attach to being kept safe from harm such as illness, abuse or injury (Morgan, 2004).

Contact with birth parents can be a sensitive area for children living away from home. A small study of 14 foster children and young people aged eight years and above (Cook *et al.*, 2000) found that their views about contact were most positive when the children were involved in making decisions about when and where this took place. The postal survey by Sinclair *et al.* (2001) pointed towards a similar conclusion.

Birth children are an important part of foster families. Cook *et al.* (2000) sought the views of fostering children and reported how the main disadvantages for them were feeling awkward with the foster child's birth parents, feeling scrutinised, being disrupted and prevented from getting on with homework, and encountering 'rude' birth parents. A Children's Express (2001) feature reported conversations with three

young people who shared their homes and parents with foster children. The main difficulties for them were when foster children were violent or badly behaved, and when this affected their schoolwork. The report concluded that children like to be consulted about fostering as, although it can be fun and rewarding, it also requires hard work.

### **The impact of parental employment**

What do children think about parental employment patterns and their impact on the parental role? Focus groups with some 30 young people aged between 11 and 18 years suggested they were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of work and held mixed views about whether their parents or carers worked too much (Lovell, 2001). The main impact came from parental stress and tiredness, affecting the atmosphere at home, and young people's own tasks and responsibilities. Although the young people said they preferred someone to be at home when they got back from school, they felt parents should be free to choose whether or not to work and able to organise paid work and suitable childcare. In an Australian study, Lewis *et al.* (2001) asked 8 year olds for their views on the time that parents work and spend with them. Generally they seemed not to think parents were working too hard if they also had time to do things with them. They did, however, express worries about parents who worked long hours and became stressed and tired.

An ethnographic study of 53 families, each of which included at least one child aged 8 to 12 years and a parent employed in the oil industry, was reported by McKee *et al.* (2003). Children with a mother not at work often said how much they appreciated her being at home when they came home from school, while those with an employed mother tended to see her as caring but also overloaded and stressed. They generally saw fathers as providers affected by the costs (stress and job insecurity) and benefits (a good income) that the role created. Many of these children had experienced local, national and international mobility because of parental employment. Some emphasised the potential impact on their schooling and friendships.

Children with working parents, especially their mothers, may attend after-school facilities and clubs. Smith and Barker (2000) studied the activities, friendships and participation in after-school and holiday childcare of 400 children aged 4 to 12. Most were attending clubs because their parents were in work, education or training, and the majority enjoyed them. They particularly liked playing with friends (especially in rural areas) and their access to specialist play equipment.

### Families under stress

#### The impact of separation and divorce

Many studies have examined children's reactions to family separation and divorce. Several key messages emerge.

- Young people whose parents' relationships break down want more information on what is happening, greater consultation on matters such as where they will live and contact with non-resident parents. A lack of information adds to uncertainties and anxieties and can affect relationships with parents. Trinder *et al.* (2002) found that the children (average age 10.8 years) in 61 divorcing families identified lack of consultation as one of the main reasons for contact arrangements not working.
- Some studies suggest parents may not appreciate how affected and distressed children can be by parental separation. Moxnes (2003), for instance, examined the impact of parental divorce on 52 children aged from 8 to 18 years in a Norwegian study. Most children said they had found it difficult and stressful to lose a parent from their household, and many said acquiring step-parents had also been hard. What helped most in these situations were parents who co-operated and behaved in a friendly manner towards each other.
- The quality of parent-child relationships is an important factor determining the outcome of separation. This emerged clearly from a study by Wade and Smart (2002) that involved focus groups with 234 5 to 10 year olds, with and without personal experiences of family separation, as well as one-to-one interviews with 47 children from separated families. Close supportive links with parents, other family members (e.g. grandparents) and trustworthy friends were among the factors that made coping easier. In another study, Neale (2002) reported how 117 young people living under a variety of post-divorce/separation arrangements told how they aspired to mutually respectful and trusting relationships with both their parents. They also highly valued good relations between their parents and did not want to become involved in conflicts.

Other messages from the evidence point to ways in which the roles of parent and child can become blurred at times of family change and divorce. Older children, in particular, may feel they are called on to support their parents emotionally (Hawthorne *et al.*, 2003). Interviews with 467 5 to 16 year olds in the United States suggested that where communication breaks down between parents and child, other more distant family members, such as grandparents or friends, may become a key source of support (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001).

### **Parental imprisonment**

Having a parent in prison is another stressful family circumstance. Recent research (Katz, 2002) looked at the impact of a parent in prison on family life and included children among the 71 family members interviewed. Children said the things they found particularly difficult were not having the parent around every day, deciding whether to tell friends at school, and prison visits. They particularly valued 'home visits' or 'town visits' to see their parent, telephone calls, and exchanging cards and letters. Some children said they tried hard to reassure the parent they were okay.

### **Violence in the family**

Mullender *et al.* (2003) carried out interviews with 54 children who had lived with domestic violence. Children indicated clearly how they tried to protect their mother, encouraging her to move away, or not talking about the violence in case it upset her. While some children did not know how to react while the violence was taking place, others tried to get their father to leave their mother alone, guard her, or call the police. Domestic violence had a marked impact on children's relationships with their fathers in these cases.

Interviews with 108 young people across the UK – members of youth organisations, young mothers, young people leaving care, or young workers – revealed that 26 had either personally experienced or witnessed physical violence (Barry, 2001b). Seventeen of the 46 young people that were care leavers reported abuse as children, mainly within reconstituted or foster families, and six (five of whom were female) mentioned sexual violence. Young people reported how many of the tensions within their families resulted from this violence or abuse in the past.

### **Young carers**

Children and young people are sometimes called upon to look after parents with severe physical or mental health problems. A body of research has explored with children what it means to be a young carer (e.g. Tatum and Tucker, 1998; Shah and Hatton, 1999; Bibby and Becker, 2000; Dearden and Becker, 2000; Young Carers Research Group, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2002; Cree, 2003; Olsen and Clarke, 2003).

Talking to young carers themselves has highlighted the broad spectrum of domestic, emotional and personal care work that they provide, and increased understanding

of the impact of caring on family relationships. It has shown, for example, how young carers frequently report a blurring of the line between being a child and a parent as they are often, in effect, the parent to their own parent(s) (Bibby and Becker, 2000). All the same, Booth and Booth (1997) found that only four of 30 men and women between 16 and 42 years who reflected on growing up with parents with learning difficulties said they had experienced a significant role reversal.

Although young carers feel that caring for a parent is part of what family members 'do' for one another, it also places severe restrictions on them and they can get fed up. Other pressures and stresses include worries about a parent's condition (for example, if they have to go into hospital) and, if the parents have severe learning difficulties, whether the children may be taken into alternative care.

Aldridge and Becker (2003) studied 40 families with young carers and concluded that the relationships and needs of parents and children are inter-dynamic. Children come to accept their role as carers, and they often develop positive relationships with their parents as a result. Understanding the circumstances of any individual family depends on listening to both children and parents.

## The dynamics of family life

### Negotiation and conflict

Parenting means providing guidance and control on one hand, while fostering growing independence on the other. This can lead to conflict. Based on the accounts of 16 year olds, Brannen (1996) suggested that negotiation during the transition to adulthood involves two dimensions: first, whether parents see adolescence as an 'achieved' (young people gradually become less dependent) or an 'ascribed' (by class and cultural norms and the labour market) status; and second, the young person's level of autonomy.

Children employ a range of tactics when faced with conflict. Montandon (2001) found the strategies reported by more than 60 11 and 12 year olds included compliance (quiet or noisy), 'working out a way', negotiation, appeal to argument, ignoring parental wishes, bargaining and making a fuss. From a different methodological stance, Zeiher (2001) studied three 10 year olds over a seven-day period to explore negotiation in child-parent relationships and, particularly, the division of domestic labour. Both he and Butler *et al.* (2005) were in agreement that the process is exceedingly complex.

In everyday life, negotiation usually has a practical focus. As a good example, Buckingham (1996) carried out focus groups with 72 children to examine how 6 to 16 year olds negotiate their television viewing. In principle they were willing to accept their parents' authority on matters such as programmes they were allowed to watch (and asserted that when they became parents themselves, they would control their own children's viewing). But in practice most felt they were mature enough to make their own decisions. Similar conclusions come from a Swedish study (Eckert, 2004) in which 72 children, aged either 6 or 10 years old, were asked about television viewing and play. The author suggests the findings fit with Mayall's (2001b) observation that while children most commonly accept parental rules, they also display resentful resistance.

The way children use the Internet has been explored by Livingstone and Bober (2004) through a UK-wide survey mapping the attitudes and practices of 1,511 children aged 9 to 19 years. Over two-thirds did not like their Internet usage monitored or curtailed by their parents and mentioned steps they had taken to prevent invasion of their privacy (e.g. deleting web logs and filters, deleting cookies and emails, and renaming files and documents).

Sexual orientation is, meanwhile, among the issues that can lead to serious conflict between young people and their parents. Mullen (1999) highlighted the large gulf that can exist between family expectations and standards for gay and lesbian young people of South Asian background. A 'gay' identity and an 'Asian' identity can be seen as mutually exclusive and 'coming out' may mean losing family support. In a wider population group, D'Augelli (2002) reported interviews with 542 lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in the USA, Canada and New Zealand aged between 14 and 21. More than a third said they had made a past suicide attempt. Most said they had discussed their sexual orientation with their mother, and perhaps also with their father. They were more likely to report mental health problems if both their parents had been rejecting of their sexual orientation. A YWCA briefing (2004) also included quotes from young women who were lesbian, bisexual or questioning their sexual orientation, reporting violence or threats of violence from their mothers on 'coming out'.

### **Discipline and punishment**

Fewer than one in ten of more than 2,000 young people in England surveyed across the primary and secondary school years said their upbringing was 'very strict', although primary-level boys were twice as likely as girls to say this (Madge, 2006). This gender difference was confirmed by 170 8 year olds in a Swedish study

of children's perceptions of parental discipline (Sorbring *et al.*, 2003). Presented with five hypothetical situations, and asked what they thought would happen, all suggested that parents would treat boys more severely than girls.

Parental discipline of children can take many forms. Interviews with 2,869 18 to 24 year olds indicated it was most often based on reasoning, explanation and non-physical punishment, with three-quarters also reporting being 'grounded' or sent to their rooms (Cawson, 2002). Most described physical discipline as 'mild and infrequent'.

Willow and Hyder (1998) discussed the effectiveness of different types of punishment with 5 to 7 year olds (and one 4 year old): 'grounding' and withholding pocket money were identified as among the most appropriate forms of discipline. In a similar study, some 8 to 9 year olds stressed the importance of rewarding good behaviour with treats and money; and removing these rewards as a means of discipline (Warren, 2003). A Canadian study presented 57 pre-schoolers between 4 and 6 years old with five vignettes illustrating different forms of psychological discipline (Konstantareas and Desbois, 2001). Although family factors made a difference, children were likely to judge different treatment of their siblings as more unfair than power assertion (threatening spanking) or public humiliation.

There is also evidence that young people recognise the ways that discipline, punishment and the negotiation of moral authority have changed in recent years. Young people in a survey of 1,800 11 to 16 year olds, plus focus groups and individual interviews, highlighted positive changes that included better communication between parents and children and greater gender equality, but also negative changes such as erosion of parental authority, family breakdown, sexual pressure and lack of family time (Thomson and Holland, 2002). Parents, nonetheless, remained a relatively unquestioned source of authority. Young people saw the need for someone to define and police moral boundaries and have the power to punish appropriately. Most also felt that parents, unlike paid professionals, had the 'right' to hit their children.

### **Children's participation in family life**

A number of research studies emphasise children's wishes to be involved in making decisions, to be informed about what is going on, and to take part in family life. One particular message is that 'being consulted' is more important than having things 'their own way' (e.g. Morrow, 1998). Children's roles in family decision-making are, however, a complex and dynamic process (Butler *et al.*, 2005). Interviews with 48

primary school pupils from four schools in Wales showed how this rarely relied on explicit formal protocols and varied within and between families. Much decision-making was participatory, although children generally accepted parental authority where there was disagreement. They did not usually seek confrontation and only one in four said they actively wanted greater involvement in family decision-making, such as having more say about bedtimes. Once again, fairness emerged as important for children, especially in relation to siblings. There is also evidence that enabling children to participate in family life can have a positive impact on young people's well-being and happiness. The examples of 'Can-do' girls (Katz, 1997) and their male counterparts (Katz, 1999) mentioned earlier attest to this claim.

Meanwhile, in the context of family breakdown, Smart and Neale (2000b) found that parenting styles and the parent-child relationship mattered more to children following separation and divorce than where they lived and contact arrangements.

### **Parental and child viewpoints: a shared understanding?**

One especially important message from research concerns differences between what parents think their children think and the views that children express themselves. A few examples serve to illustrate this point.

- Regarding parenting styles, Cohen and Rice (1997) found that agreement between 386 children and their parents was poor, and argued that it was difficult to determine whose perceptions were more accurate. Nonetheless, they maintained that parents would benefit from understanding how they are perceived by their children.
- On parental influence, findings from a BT/ChildLine (2002) study suggested that parents may underestimate their powers of persuasion (Madge, 2006). Whereas children said they were influenced most by their parents and families, adults thought that friends and peer pressure were more important.
- In relation to responsibility and decision-making, children may feel more independent and ready to take on responsibilities than their parents recognise (Madge, 2006). Asked, for instance, about the age at which a child should be able to visit a doctor for a confidential appointment, children on average suggested 13 years while adults said 14.5.
- There is evidence that parents often do not understand what their children are going through at times of serious emotional disturbance. Studies suggesting

that many children are more upset than parents think by family separation have already been mentioned. Gorin (2004) also demonstrated how children can be more aware of problems facing parents in their relationships, and more worried about them, than parents realise. ChildLine (1998) reached a similar conclusion following an analysis of calls to their helpline about family relationships and divorce. As a further illustration, Meltzer *et al.* (2000) found that children reported much higher rates of self-harm than their parents reported on their behalf.

### **Parenting is a two-way process**

Young people are aware that family life is a two-way process. They appreciate that how their parents behave towards them depends, to some extent at least, on how they act and react as children.

For example, the study by Madge (2006) found that children recognised that grown-ups tended to be more polite and respectful to children than children were to adults. Children also perceived that adults liked pursuing activities with them more than they liked doing things with adults. In addition they were more likely to agree that parents spend enough time talking to their children than to acknowledge that children spend enough time talking to parents. Children had lots of ideas about how adults could improve young people's lives – but they could also see what they could do to make adults' lives happier and more enjoyable.

Children, as social actors within their families, may be instrumental in affecting family relations in many different types of settings. Those growing up in families that foster is a good example. This emerged clearly from 20 interviews and three group sessions with children in these circumstances (Spears and Cross, 2003) and demonstrated how these children can significantly affect the success or failure of a placement.

## **Growing up – and becoming parents**

### **Developing independence**

Part of growing up is becoming more independent and making more decisions. Nonetheless, even as they get older, many children remain happy to leave decisions to others (Leach, 2003). Ghate and Daniels (1997) found that most of the 8 to 15 year olds in a survey of more than 1,000 felt they should decide about their

hair and what they wear, even if they had less control over the time they went to bed and whether they were allowed to go out on their own. Overall, young people seemed happy with the way things were and only 12 per cent indicated that they would like more say at home. Madge (2006) confirmed that most children do not feel they make too many decisions for themselves. Morrow (1998) also indicated, from questionnaires and structured activities with 8 to 14 year olds, that most children want a say in family matters but do not necessarily want to make decisions. Autonomy, however, increases with age, even if young people at 14 still recognise ground rules and expect their parents to exert authority if they do not comply (Langford *et al.*, 2001).

Stace and Roker (2004) interviewed 50 young people aged 11 to 16 and their parents/carers to find out how monitoring and supervision are experienced by ordinary families. Young people (and adults) saw this as meaning that parents know where their child is, what they are doing and who they are with. They felt this was a key part of parental care, love, guidance and protection.

However, young people do not want to feel overly protected as this can interfere with growing independence. Many, particularly younger children and girls, regard their parents as overprotective and say they worry too much about them (Madge, 2006).

There is also evidence that children in public care may face less consistent patterns of decision-making than others. Thomas and O'Kane (1999) carried out a survey of 225 'looked after' children between 8 and 12 years old, and a detailed study of 47. These children reported varied experiences, but indicated that the decisions they controlled or influenced could change as they moved from one placement to another. Everyday decisions were as important to them as longer-term ones about their future.

### **Learning about parenthood**

Children learn aspects of the parenting role through experience and 'trial and error', so that even 5 to 8 year olds can express an appreciation of what parenthood involves (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998). Furthermore, the tactics children recommend for parents may closely resemble those likely to be promoted by parenting programmes.

Schools play some part in the learning process, although input is not systematic and has rarely been subject to evaluation. An Ofsted (2002) report on sex education based on 140 school inspections noted how discussions with pupils had showed they

wanted to learn more about being a parent and felt this was not being addressed in sufficient depth at school.

Children may also be involved in parenthood education, if indirectly, through parenting programmes. Ghate and Ramella (2002) were interested in whether parents' participation in the Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme had any measurable impact on their children. There was no direct research contact with children, but parents did take questionnaires home for them to complete and return. Despite a low return and a large amount of missing data, there was some suggestion of positive change, especially around better communication and mutual understanding. In a second study, Bell and Fisher (2003) interviewed 11 children aged 5 to 11 years two weeks after they and their parents had attended separate sessions of parenting programmes in the North of England. They said the programme had helped them deal with problems at home and school and to manage their feelings. Some reported how their parents' behaviour towards them had changed and how things had got better at home.

### **Parenting experiences and parenting behaviour**

Does upbringing affect later attitudes and behaviour? Two types of study have attempted to examine this question. The first has asked children how they think their experiences will affect their own parenting styles. The second has asked adults, and often parents, how their own childhood has affected their experiences of parenthood.

As an illustration of the first approach, Willow and Hyder (1998) collected the views of 75 5 to 7 year olds and one 4 year old on smacking and how they thought they would discipline their own children when parents. Half the children said they would not smack their own children in the future – which implied that half might. Learning about economics and the wider world was the focus of another study (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999) with children from lone-parent families, Income Support families, and lone-parent families on Income Support. This investigated how children learn about income and money management from their parents – by listening and through the management of their own pocket money. The comments made by more than 400 children aged 5 to 16 suggested that understanding gained within the family played an important part in shaping children's expectations and aspirations.

In another investigation, questionnaire responses from over 1,700 11 to 16 year olds, together with findings from focus groups and in-depth interviews, were used to study the lives, loves, hopes and fears of young people growing up in five contrasting locations of the UK (Sharpe, 2001). It emerged that young people's views were

shaped by relationships in their own families and among their friends, as well as by the views and advice of parents. Most wanted to get married, although they were realistic about the possibilities of separation and divorce, but they were also positive about cohabitation. Almost all said that living with parental conflict and hostility was worse than parental separation.

Similar conclusions came from a UK-wide study in which interviews were held with 108 young people (members of youth organisations, young mothers, young people leaving care and young workers) between 14 and 27 years old (Barry, 2001b). Most had taken considerable responsibility for looking after parents and siblings during childhood and said this helped in becoming parents themselves – whether by providing models to follow, or models to avoid. The young mothers told how having their own children had made them responsible, and five of the young people who had spent time in care specifically wanted to adopt or foster children in the future. Although young people felt that parenting was instinctive rather than a learned skill, many of the young mothers acknowledged the need for training in parenthood, both on practical tasks and in relating appropriately to their children.

Creighton and Russell (1995) carried out a retrospective study looking at the impact of childhood experiences of discipline and punishment. From interviews with over 1,000 18 to 45 year olds, it emerged that those who said they received little or no physical punishment as children reported bringing up their children in the same way. Those who said they received frequent punishment, although in theory more tolerant to disciplining their own children, seemed in practice to administer more punishments than the rest. An American study (Sabattini, 2004) further suggested that parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or disengaged) seemed significantly related to how mothers and fathers divided up household tasks. Almost 300 19-year-old undergraduates looked retrospectively at their experiences of being parented and the division of labour within their families. The author concluded that parenting may be the key to gender ideals and equality in later life.

In another study, Corlyon and McGuire (1999) examined whether young people's experiences of parenting and family life seemed to affect their own expectations, ambitions and choices. The research data included 30 interviews with young people who were in, or had recently left, public care and were already, or were about to be, parents, as well as questionnaires completed by 212 teenagers (mostly 14 and 15 year olds), half of whom were in public care. Follow-up interviews were carried out with 67 of those in public care who were surveyed. When asked to think of family life, those in public care were significantly more likely than others to mention 'step-parents' and 'arguments', and girls were significantly more likely to point to 'a lone mother', 'violence' and 'watching TV'. By contrast, they were significantly less likely

to say they got on very well with their mothers and fathers, and that their parents respected their ideas, listened to them, understood them and trusted them. Many felt they did not have good parental role models or good parenting skills, and one in three said they would have liked more 'teaching' on family life. Fewer than half, as compared with most of the school sample, said they would bring up their children as they had been brought up themselves. Early partnership and parenthood seemed to hold a stronger attraction for young people in public care than for the others.

An interesting early study by Rutter and colleagues (1983) adopted a combination of retrospective and prospective research strategies to investigate the links between local authority care in parents and their birth children. The *retrospective* study asked how often adults' parenting problems were associated with their own experience of adverse parenting when young, and studied 48 families with a child admitted into the care of the local authority during a defined period of time, as well as 47 families from the same area but without a child in care. The complementary question for the *prospective* study was the likelihood that poor parenting in childhood would lead to parenting difficulties in adulthood. For this, a sample of 81 women who had been in institutional care in childhood, as well as 41 who had not but lived in the same area as children, were interviewed. The findings, which related only to women, left little doubt that adverse experiences in childhood increased the risk of poor parenting in early adult life. Nonetheless, a positive association was not inevitable or straightforward. Conditions in adult life (especially a 'good' marriage), among other things, also contributed to outcomes.

### **3 Research questions and research gaps**

Future research looking at children's perspectives on parenting could take several directions. However, just because there is no information in an area does not mean it is necessarily needed. The family is generally regarded as a private institution and it can be argued that invading this privacy is justified only when the benefits outweigh any disadvantages. It is also necessary as a preliminary step to ask whether research is likely to be considered important by young people themselves. This might be ascertained from existing work, or through some additional consultation. In addition, it is important that any future research programme takes account of the changing social climate and the changing role and status that children have within their families as well as the wider community.

#### **Overview of research strategies in working with children**

This review does not provide a full account of research methods and strategies used in collecting information directly from children; nor does it report to any degree on children's views on being involved in research. A first suggestion for an emerging programme on parenting would, therefore, be a more focused review of methods appropriate for exploring children's perspectives. This should be prepared with the assistance of children and young people to ensure that it takes account of their views of how they can best be involved in research. It could inform new work and ensure that future studies do not succumb to pressures on time and resources by relying unduly on the more conventional and tested methods.

#### **Young people's views (and input) into parenting programmes**

A wide range of parenting programmes currently exists for families at risk (Barrett, 2003). These aim to improve parenting skills and outcomes for children. A noticeable gap in almost all these programmes, however, is the involvement of young people. We found very little evidence that they had participated at any level in developing the content for such programmes, their administration, or assessments of their value and impact. Involving children in the constructions of their own lives, and consulting them on initiatives to this end, would seem to be an important research priority.

### **Outcomes of assisted reproduction**

A growing number of children are conceived through assisted reproduction methods. McWhinnie (2000) has asked about the impact of non-traditional conception on young people as they grow to adulthood and become parents themselves. Golombok and MacCallum (2003) have also highlighted out how little is known about the consequences of conception by assisted reproduction from the perspective of the individuals and children themselves. Children's identities are profoundly linked to who their parents are and have been. How do they feel when exposed to different norms? What are the implications for making information on their backgrounds available? These would seem very important research questions in the contemporary context of parenting.

### **Parenting in a multicultural society**

The nature of Britain as a multicultural society is continually changing. Both the entry of families from a wider range of countries and the acculturation and assimilation of families who have been in the country for several generations have implications for parenting. No recent major study has assembled information from a multicultural population of children on how culture can affect family life. A new investigation in this area could examine children's views of parental authority, and how concepts of 'ideal' parenting are dictated by school, peers, the media and home. Furthermore, how far does 'actual' parenting match 'ideal' parenting for children from different cultural backgrounds? Are parents allowing young people to participate in local cultures or are they requiring them to conform to home standards? What, more generally, are the implications of a multicultural society for young people these days? These and related questions could form the basis of an important contemporary research study.

### **Parents, children and the state**

Parenting is generally regarded as a private matter, but the state is becoming increasingly involved (e.g. with tighter legislation on smacking and discipline and greater intervention following divorce). Where do children think authority should lie for decision making on parenting and family issues? Who should be responsible for what at a legislative level? Clarke *et al.* (1996) used vignettes with a small group of children aged 10 to 17 living in lone-parent households to determine their opinions on the underlying principles of the Child Support Act. It would seem that similar lines

of enquiry could be adapted to other policy and practice issues pertaining to family life.

Also of research interest are the child's experiences of parenting when there is a potential clash with the state. For instance, do parents endorse the views of the state or do they support their children when anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) are issued? How is the process of parenting affected when children are excluded from school? Children's views on questions such as these would be of considerable interest and value.

## **The role of parents in health care and health promotion**

Where do parental responsibilities begin and end? In health care, for example, do children see their parents as responsible for keeping them healthy, or are they willing for others to play a considerable role? Promoting healthy diets and healthy lifestyles is a current priority as a growing number of children are found to be overweight. Nonetheless, health promotion strategies directed at children have met with little success. Do children think that parents could do more to encourage their healthy living and, if so, how do they think they should do this?

## **Supporting the transition to adulthood**

The transition to adulthood and independence can be a stressful experience. Young carers may find it particularly difficult. Others can also be resistant to leaving home for financial reasons. Apter (2001) discussed the emotional and practical support parents can give children in young adulthood, and it would seem that this is an area where further research could be undertaken from young people's perspectives.

## **Learning to be a parent**

Most children grow up to be parents themselves. Schools and the National Curriculum acknowledge some responsibility to help prepare them for this role, but we were not able to locate any reports detailing children's views on parenthood education received at school. Further investigation of this question would be valuable.

### Monitoring change

Society is rapidly changing and childhood is regarded very differently than in the past (James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). Patterns of parenting have also changed, not least in so far as childhoods were stricter and children were consulted less (Madge, 2006). In other ways, too, family life and the roles of children and parents are rapidly changing (NCH Action for Children, 1997). Statistics on the numbers of children with televisions in their bedrooms and the enforced demise of the OXO family advertisement depicting joint family meals are two illustrations of the ways that family life is on the move. This undoubtedly has an impact on parent–child relationships, but whether this has been for the ‘better’ or ‘worse’ is less clear, as are young people’s views on the matter.

It is important to keep up to date with children’s perspectives in these areas. The investigation of parenthood is a contemporary issue where reliance on outdated research may convey outdated messages. One worthwhile research initiative might be to establish a regular panel study of children (and their parents) to monitor contemporary changes in family life in a more systematic manner.

## 4 Involving children in research on parenting

Involving children in research raises both ethical and methodological issues. Many of these are well known and widely discussed (e.g. ensuring children's welfare, addressing child protection issues, gaining informed consent, protecting children's rights and confidentiality). Useful texts dealing with these issues, including innovative ways to involve children in research, include Alderson (1995, 2001); Sinclair (1996); Brannen *et al.* (2000); Christensen and James (2000); Smith (2000); Mayall (2001a); Lewis and Lindsay (2002); Alderson and Morrow (2004); and Save the Children (2004).

Encouraging children's participation at all stages of research – discussing and developing ideas, contributing to research tools and processes, and taking part in dissemination of the findings – increases the legitimacy of investigating young people's views and experiences. This chapter gives illustrative examples of some of the possibilities and considerations to be taken into account. Not mentioned among them, but also worth stressing, is the value of making research with children as enjoyable and stimulating as possible. According to one young participant in our own focus groups, the purpose of asking children for their views on parenting is not just about getting their opinions, but also about trying to make them think. He considered that taking part in research was valuable for children if it encouraged them to change their behaviour, even slightly, for the better.

### Young researchers

Young researchers are increasingly being involved in carrying out studies with other young people. Reviews and guidance in this area have looked at the stages at which they can feasibly be involved, the ways in which they can be involved, and how their informed involvement can be encouraged (Kirby, 1999; Worrall, 2000; Alderson, 2001). Alderson suggested that benefits include power for children, new opportunities for research and possibilities for children's perspectives to inform policy and practice. Young researchers can be particularly useful in groups where young people's views are not usually heard (Jones *et al.*, 2002).

Children can also be enlisted to pass on research messages. Brannen (2002) described how videos with young people as narrators can be used to disseminate findings on children's perspectives about family life. They can also provide a forum for researchers and children to discuss the interpretation of the research findings.

### **Broaching sensitive areas**

Discussing parents and family lives can bring back painful memories for children and cause distress. Even talking to young people about preparation for parenthood in general can invoke childhood memories (Braun and Schonveld, 1992). In all these cases, researchers need to be adequately prepared. The consensus of many studies is that sensitive issues should not be avoided with children provided there is a good reason for carrying out a particular piece of research. Children in Mitchell's (1985) study, for instance, said that interviews had brought back unhappy memories but that it did not matter. Nonetheless, these topics may require special research strategies, such as getting young people to decide how the information should be collected, how the groups should be composed and where the discussions should take place (Mason and Falloon, 2001).

### **Providing consent**

Informed consent is a process that starts before research gets under way and continues through the progress of an interview or focus group. At any stage, children must feel able to decline to respond to anything they do not wish to discuss. Butler and Scanlan (2003) addressed the possibility of children's reluctance to say they do not know an answer, or unwillingness to give one by letting children 'practise' telling the researcher they did not want to answer certain questions through role play.

Researchers are frequently frustrated by being denied access to children by adult gatekeepers who believe they are acting in the young people's best interests (Hood *et al.*, 1996; Mason and Falloon, 2001). Butler *et al.* (2005) described ways in which they gained the confidence of parents to allow access to their children. A regular newsletter and a website were particularly successful in this respect. A much discussed topic in our own focus groups was the need for parental gatekeepers to provide access to young people. The prevailing view in both groups was that parents do not usually need to be asked, but that they should be informed.

### **Making research socially inclusive**

A common problem encountered by researchers is gaining access to samples of children that represent the diversity of parenting experiences. Involving very young children can, for instance, present the challenge of developing sufficiently creative

methodologies to attract their interest and elicit the required information (see Clark and Moss, 2001). Talking to children with special needs, particularly those with learning difficulties or problems with attention or speech, present different issues (Alderson and Goodey, 1996; Beresford, 1997; Ward, 1997). Reaching some groups of excluded young people can also be challenging. Craig and Coles (2002) reported finding it extremely difficult to make and keep contact with a group of vulnerable and disaffected young people over even a short period of time.

### **Should children's reports be taken at face value?**

Some research implicitly assumes that children's accounts of their own lives are accurate and can be taken at face value. Yet children, just like everyone else, make decisions on the information they wish to impart as well as the 'spin' they decide to put on it. Hood *et al.* (1996) noted how children put up 'fronts' when asked questions about family life they are uncomfortable with. Furthermore, can children legitimately be asked to comment on matters that are largely outside their experience such as, for example, employment and intimacy (Jensen and McKee, 2003)? Can they even be expected to compare their experiences with those of other young people? Näsman (2003) observed that children do not necessarily know anything other than their own family circumstances, and they might well be more critical of their own situation if they did. Recognition of these points is important in the interpretation of research findings.

### **Representing children's views**

How children's views are represented is another issue. As Morrow and Richards (1996, p. 103) commented, 'adult researchers must be aware that they have the power to interpret data in any way they please'. The selective reporting of findings is one point in question. Some research reports, for instance, openly acknowledge that greater weight is given to the quotes from older than from younger children as the former are more articulate. The messages conveyed from research are another. These need to be considered with care, and with thought as to how they may be reported by the media (Alderson, 1995).

### **Providing feedback**

Providing feedback to young people involved in research studies, and asking for their opinions on the way their views have been represented, is one strategy that might help to ensure that young perspectives are presented validly. The progress of research is often slow, feedback can be difficult if young people cannot be located, and children may not always want to be reminded of what they have said (Mayall, 2001a). The issue of feedback, however, remains an important one and should be addressed in any study with children.

### **How different is research with children from research with anyone else?**

Finally, Solberg (1996) questions how far research with children is 'special' and recommends a certain ignorance of 'age'. Her argument is that the most important thing about a particular context may be what children are 'doing' rather than who they are 'being'. In other words, age may not be relevant and childhood, in this sense, may not always exist in a research context.

# 5 Summary and conclusions

## Research findings

- Gaining children's perspectives greatly increases understanding of the parenting process and demonstrates that what young people think is not necessarily what adults think they think.
- Children are competent to observe and comment on their own lives and are frequently perceptive about the behaviours, attitudes and feelings of their parents and carers. They realise that they, as well as their parents, have an impact on their upbringing.
- Children do not have a rigid idea of parents and families, although they do see mothers and fathers in somewhat different roles.
- They tend to respect the authority of parent figures, and their 'right' to discipline and punish them – even if, at the same time, they adopt strategies to negotiate decisions.
- Children have views on most things and like to have a say in life decisions as well as day-to-day matters. They want to be consulted even if the final decision is not theirs.
- Children value good relationships, love and support, and dislike conflict within the family. They can cope with family separation and other stresses if they feel cared for.
- Many children seem to have some idea of what parenting involves – but often say they would welcome more training and preparation for parenthood.
- Experiences of parenting affect attitudes and behaviour including expectations of parenthood and later parenting.

## Research questions and research gaps

- Family lives change over time and new areas of research interest arise. The impact of assisted reproduction on children's lives is, for example, of relatively recent concern.

- Other 'new' areas for research enquiry reflect changing patterns of ethnicity and culture within the community, and new potential relationships between parents and the state.
- More attention could be paid to the areas and ways in which parents support their children. Encouraging healthy lifestyles and managing the transition to adulthood provide two examples.
- Interventions to promote parenting skills exist for parents through parenting programmes and for children through parenthood education. Exploration of children's perspectives on these initiatives would be valuable.
- Children should be involved at all stages of future research on parenting to ensure the saliency of its content and methods.

### Carrying out research with children

- Involving children in research is about more than simply asking them questions and exploring their views. It means also getting them to participate throughout the research process, from determining the focus of enquiry and methodology to interpreting the findings and disseminating the messages. Feedback on research findings should be made available to children who would like it.
- Children are able and willing to discuss sensitive subjects. Nonetheless they should be asked to do so only if there is good reason to explore the issues involved, if they are taking part with informed consent, and if strategies are developed to ensure they feel as comfortable as possible.
- Research with children should be as socially inclusive as possible. Special approaches and strategies may need to be developed to facilitate the participation of certain groups, such as young children, those with special needs, and those for whom English is not the first language.
- There is a need to ensure that children are asked appropriate questions and that findings are fairly reported. Particular attention should be paid to the messages that the media may draw from research reports.

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