

Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown

Family patterns have undergone rapid change in the past 30 years. A special report by David Utting relates the findings of research and development work to public policy and points a way forward.

- Despite political rhetoric emphasising the importance of family life, there has been a policy drift away from recognising the costs and demands of parenthood.
- Families have increasingly found themselves on the wrong side of a growing divide between rich and poor, with adverse consequences for children.
- The relatively favourable direct taxation treatment of working parents with children that existed 30 years ago has been eroded under successive governments.
- With divorce rates at their recorded peak, evidence has accumulated that children who experience the breakdown of their parents' relationship run greater risks of educational, health and behaviour problems, compared with those whose families remain intact.
- Although the additional risks are often modest, they appear to increase where dependent children have been through a succession of family changes.
- Scope exists for a wide spectrum of parent education and other measures helping families to cope in times of stress and minimise any undesirable consequences for children. Such services require a closer and adequately funded relationship between statutory social services and the voluntary sector.
- The wider provision of family support services, identified by the 1989 Children Act as a means of preventing child abuse and family breakdown, has not been achieved.
- There is an urgent need for policy-making within government to be co-ordinated with the aim of strengthening family life. Research should pay more attention to protective factors that enable different types of families - whether intact, lone or step - to thrive.

Introduction

In 1993, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) decided that its work concerned with the family and parenthood should receive a higher priority and increased resources. The Foundation also organised a series of seminars, bringing together policy-makers, practitioners and academic specialists to consider the changing circumstances of families and the implications for further research. The threads of those discussions - concluded during United Nations International Year of the Family - and the findings of JRF and other relevant research studies are drawn together in a report published by the Foundation, *Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown*. The report also examines the role of public policy, offering a guide to the heated and sometimes contradictory debate surrounding families. The main conclusions of the report are summarized here.

Family trends

Following a period of exceptional stability in family organisation and attitudes, the past 30 years have witnessed rapid change. For example:

- Annual marriage rates per thousand population have reached their lowest levels since records began.
- The proportion of brides experiencing cohabitation before their wedding day has increased in 25 years from 6 per cent of brides to 60 per cent.
- Fertility rates have declined in 30 years from a post-war peak of 2.9 to 1.8 children per woman.
- Nearly one in three births currently occur outside marriage compared with one in sixteen 30 years ago.
- The divorce rate has shown a sixfold increase since 1961. If current trends in England and Wales continue, four out of ten new marriages will end in divorce.
- One in five families with dependent children are headed by a lone parent compared with one in 12 in 1971. Among them, the proportion of families headed by single (never-married) mothers has grown from 1 per cent to 7 per cent.
- One in 12 dependent children are living in step-families.
- Two out of three mothers with dependent children either have jobs or are actively seeking work compared with fewer than half 20 years ago.
- Employment patterns have become increasingly polarised between 'dual earner' families and homes where nobody has a paid job.

Forecasts of 'the death of the traditional family' exaggerate the nature of the changes in which more than seven out of ten families with dependent children continue to be headed by both 'birth' parents. The continuity between contemporary family patterns and those of 30 years ago is, even so, limited. The growth in divorce and the increased number of children born to young, single mothers raise particular questions about the well-being of children.

Rhetoric and reality

A balanced understanding of change needs to take account of the economic and environmental circumstances of families with children. Policies on taxation, benefits, employment and housing provide a practical test of whether political rhetoric has been matched by 'family friendly' action. Much of the evidence is negative, suggesting a policy drift under successive governments away from recognising the costs and demands of parenthood.

Widening inequality since the late 1970s - quantified by the recent JRF Inquiry into Income and Wealth - has placed growing numbers of families with children on the wrong side of the growing divide between rich and poor. Between 1979 and 1992, the proportion of dependent children living in homes with less than half average income (after housing costs) grew from 10 per cent (1.4 million children) to 32 per cent (4.1 million children).

An examination of direct tax reveals that the favourable treatment which parents used to receive compared with childless earners has been eroded. In 1994-5, the share of average male earnings taken in Income Tax and National Insurance from a married couple with two dependent children¹ stood 12.9 percentage points higher than in 1964-5. Increases in the burden of direct tax on married parents with less than national average wages have been proportionately greater than this. The equivalent increases for married and single men without children were 8.2 and 5.5 percentage points respectively. Research, meanwhile, links economic disadvantage and impoverished living conditions to the chances that children will fail to thrive. Differences are apparent in terms of their health and educational development. Living on a low income in a run-down neighbourhood does not make it impossible to be an affectionate, authoritative parent. But it undeniably makes it more difficult.

Marriage and divorce

Changing attitudes to marriage reflect changes as diverse as the availability of effective contraception, the growth of women's employment and the premium nowadays placed on achieving fulfilment within personal relationships. Higher divorce rates may be a consequence of higher rather than lower expectations being vested in modern partnerships and subsequently disappointed. What is more certain is the way in which parenthood changes marriage and can serve to expose any existing fault-lines.

Evidence has accumulated that children who experience the breakdown of their birth parents' relationship run added risks of adverse educational, health and behavioural outcomes compared with those from similar social backgrounds whose families remain intact. *Some* negative consequences for *some* children persist into adult life. There is, however, no inevitable path down which children will travel following divorce. The statistical differences with children from intact families, although no coincidence, are in many cases modest. Research supports a view that conflict between parents - before, during and after separation - is among the

more significant adverse influences on children. Recent research has underlined the distress that children feel at the time of separation and its aftermath in terms of lowered self-esteem and, for some, psychosomatic health problems and difficulties at school. It adds to the evidence that the chances of such problems occurring are greater where children have been through a number of family transitions (for example, their own parents' separation, life in a one-parent family, becoming part of a stepfamily and experiencing its subsequent breakdown).

Cohabitation and single parenthood

Most cohabitation is between childless couples. However, cohabitants who have children and have not previously been married tend to have lower qualifications and be financially poorer than their married counterparts. There is widespread ignorance among such couples regarding the father's lack of parental rights in the absence of a formal, legal agreement.

Up-to-date information about the growing number of single mothers who have never been married is scarce. Studies of children born outside marriage more than 35 years ago point to a complex picture in which family transitions during childhood appear influential.

Preventing breakdown

Families are places where the risks of adversity can multiply for socially and emotionally disadvantaged children, but they are also places where timely support can reap substantial rewards. Preventive services may not only avert an impending crisis, but also avoid the need for later, more expensive, intervention. Innovative projects, described in the report, cover a spectrum ranging from parent education services that could benefit any family in the land, to intensive family preservation projects where children are at risk of abuse. The role of RELATE and other relationship counselling organisations is acknowledged, as is that of mediation services in assisting parents who choose to separate. Research suggests that comprehensive mediation - where couples are helped to reach property settlements as well as arrangements for their children - can reduce the acrimony on either side.

The 1989 Children Act recognises the preventive value of asking statutory social services to extend their umbrella of support beyond crisis work with suspected child abuse cases. Research, however, shows that the services currently available remain targeted on families where children are registered 'at risk'. Progress has been disappointingly slow in achieving the partnership envisaged by the Act between local authorities and voluntary organisations specialising in parent education and family support. The inept implementation of the Child Support Act is another example of a principled aim - that non-resident parents should remain financially responsible for dependent children - going awry in practice.

The laws relating to the legal rights of cohabiting parents and to divorce are in urgent need of reform. The Lord Chancellor's consultation proposals for ending divorce based on marital 'fault' and

introducing a one-year period 'for reflection and mediation' have the potential to convert the law into an active ally of preventive work. But much would depend on funding and other arrangements for mediation services.

Next steps

i) For researchers: improving the preventive power of parent education and family support work will require an increased understanding of how the right services can be made available to the right families at the right time. The case for investing in prevention - including its cost-effectiveness - would be enhanced by rigorous evaluation of the most promising existing initiatives.

The focus of research on 'broken homes' and 'lone parenthood' no longer does justice to contemporary family organisation. Greater understanding is needed of the experiences of children spending all or part of their lives in cohabiting families, with a single (unmarried) mother, or in stepfamilies. The role of fathers merits closer examination as does that of the extended family. There is a notable shortage of reliable information on family patterns among ethnic minorities.

The causes of family breakdown deserve further investigation to discover how parents can best manage conflict in ways that minimise the hurt to their children. The influence on family functioning of working hours and other employment terms and practices is another important research area. More generally, it would make sense to study ordinary families - two parent, lone-parent or step - to find out how they manage as 'good enough' parents. The JRF pledges a continuing contribution to these and other family research needs.

ii) For policy-makers: evidence exists that much of the stress and adversity that currently diminishes the lives of parents and their children is unnecessary because it is preventable. There is an urgent need for co-ordinated policies that will strengthen the way that all kinds of families manage to function. The U.N. International Year of the Family in Britain added to the volume of rhetoric about families and parenthood. What is now required from policy-makers is effective action. Among the key questions that politicians and others need to answer are:

1. Is it acceptable that the tax regime applying to parents with dependent children has grown less favourable or should fuller recognition be given to the extra costs associated with children?

2. Given evidence that the tax and benefit system and a lack of affordable child care facilities are 'trapping' parents on benefits who want paid work, what reforms should now be introduced?

3. What can and should governments and employers do to make it easier for parents to balance their responsibilities at home and at work?

4. What additional resources should be made available for family support services, including, in particular, proper implementation of the preventive provisions in the Children Act?

5. What measures should be introduced to make parental education more widely available?

6. How can schools be encouraged to make education for family life a more effective part of the curriculum?

7. What can be done through law reform and improved services to support the stability of cohabiting relationships with dependent children and to clarify the rights of cohabiting parents?

8. What should be done to ensure that couples whose relationships are under stress have access to counselling and other support services when most needed?

9. How will the availability of comprehensive mediation be improved and other services designed to minimise the distress and adversity for children whose parents decide to separate?

10. Given the multiple problems diminishing the life chances of the most disadvantaged families, what should be done to achieve better co-operation between government departments, agencies and voluntary organisations to deliver the multiple solutions that are required?

Further information

Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown by David Utting is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (price £9.50)

¹ Children aged under 11; Child Benefit counted as negative Income Tax. The wife, for illustrative purposes, is assumed not to be earning.

Related Findings

The following JRF research Findings and Summaries are referred to in the report

Social Policy Research

- 7 Policy implications of current demographic trends (July 90)
- 13 Child benefit, child tax reliefs and basic incomes compared (Feb 91)
- 28 Credit and debt (Feb 92)
- 31 Household budgets and living standards (Nov 92)
- 34 Comparing different households in measuring poverty (Jan 93)
- Summary:** One parent families. Policy options for the 1990s (Feb 93)
- 37 The rise of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage (May 93)
- 42 Long-term cohabiting mothers (Sept 93)
- 44 Lone parenthood and family disruption: the outcomes for children (Jan 94)
- 45 Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)
- 48 An evaluation of comprehensive mediation services for divorcing couples (Feb 94)
- 49 UK income distribution during the 1980s (June 94)
- 53 Strategies used by low-income families with children to make ends meet (Jul 94)
- 60 Women's pay and family income inequality (Oct 94)
- 61 More work in fewer households (Oct 94)
- 66 Eating on a low income (Nov 94)
- 69 Supporting families in the workplace (Jan 95)

Summary: Report of the JRF Inquiry Group into Income and Wealth (Feb 95)

Housing Research

- 25 The housing consequences of divorce (Jan 91)
- 84 New housing association estates: emerging problems (Apr 93)
- 97 Estate regeneration at Meadowell (Oct 93)
- 100 Urban regeneration: UK and German problems and approaches (Dec 93)
- 107 Multi-agency working on difficult-to-manage estates (Feb 94)
- 126 Difficult times for all housing sectors (Sep 94)

For information on these and other Findings, call Sally Corrie on 01904-654328 (direct line for publication enquiries only).



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