

The relationship between family life and young people's lifestyles

This study of around 1,000 young people in the West of Scotland looked at three aspects of family life: structure (whether young people were living with both biological parents, 'step-parent' families or only one parent), time spent by the young person in family activities, and conflict (frequency of arguments between them and their parents). The study finds statistical associations between various outcomes for these young people and these three aspects of family life. The research team found:

- f** Families could not be placed into distinct or simple overall categories. There were no consistent links between these three dimensions of family life and the outcomes for young people, apart from some association between family structure and family time.
- f** Separate aspects of family life (structure, time and conflict) at 15 were associated in different ways with various aspects of their lifestyles when these young people reached 18.
- f** Those who had been living with both biological parents at age 15 were least likely to have experience of illicit drugs or be unemployed three years later. Young women living with both biological parents were also more likely to have left school with qualifications and least likely to have been pregnant by age 18.
- f** For 18-year-old women, drug use and pregnancy were much more common among those who had lost a parent through death than those whose parents had separated. Nearly half those who had experienced the death of a parent had tried illicit drugs compared to one-in-five living with both parents.
- f** Young people who reported more conflict with parents (regardless of family structure) were more likely to have health problems and lower self-esteem. They were also more likely to smoke, to have done less well at school, and were less likely to be students. There were no significant associations between conflict and drug misuse or early pregnancy.
- f** The most consistent relationships occurred in respect of 'family time'. Young people who spent more time with the rest of their family were less likely to smoke or to have tried illicit drugs. They were more likely to have left school later, to have some qualifications, and to be students, with women less likely to have been pregnant by age 18.

Introduction

There is widespread concern about family life today, not only about family structures, but also about family relationships, authority and control. This study of around 1,000 young people in the West of Scotland who have been followed since they were aged 15 looked at the ways in which different dimensions of family life were associated with health and 'lifestyle' and with success at school and in the job market.

The study looked at the following dimensions of family life:

- *family structure* - the young people were categorised into three groups; those with both biological parents living together, those in 'step-parent' families (one biological parent, generally the mother, married to or cohabiting with a new partner), and those with a lone parent. For those in step- and lone-parent households, reason for family disruption (distinguishing between parental separation and death) was also examined.
- *'family time'* - the time spent by the young person in activities with the rest of the family, like eating a meal or watching television together.
- *'conflict'* - the frequency, as reported by the young person, of arguments between themselves and their parents about things like household chores or getting home late.

These dimensions were not significantly related to each other, apart from the fact that young people living with both biological parents reported spending more time in joint family activities. It is therefore not possible to take one dimension of family life as a proxy for all the rest. For example, a young person who frequently argued with their parents may or may not have spent a lot of time with their family and may have been living in any of the three different family structures.

Health and self-esteem

In this sample, despite the concentration of low incomes among lone-parent households, neither physical symptoms, psychological well-being, nor self-esteem at age 18 were related to the young person's family structure at 15 or the amount of time spent with the family at 15.

Greater conflict with parents was related to poorer health. Young people who had reported most arguments with parents had more physical symptoms

(such as indigestion, palpitations and colds or flu), poorer psychological health and lower self-esteem three years later. The strongest relationships between conflict and physical and psychological well-being occurred for women.

Smoking and drug use

There were no significant differences in smoking at age 18 among young people from different family structures, although those from step-parent households were more likely to have tried illicit drugs. For women only, the rates of drug use were also linked with family disruption; highest among those who had experienced the death of a parent (47%) compared with those whose parents had separated (37%) and those who had been living with both biological parents (20%).

Those who spent less time with the family at age 15 were more likely to be smokers and to have tried illicit drugs by 18. For example, among those who spent least time, 41% smoked and 47% had tried drugs compared with 25% (smokers) and 26% (drugs) of those spending most time with the family.

Those who had reported most rows with their parents were more likely to have smoked (39%) compared with those who had reported least rows (of whom 23% smoked). Conflict with parents was unrelated to experience of illicit drugs.

Secondary education

When financial circumstances were controlled for statistically, there were no significant differences in the age that either men or women left school according to their family structure. However, for women (but not men) there were differences in qualifications: those from step-parent families were more likely than those living with just one or both biological parents to have left school without qualifications.

Differences in school success according to 'family time' were, however, more marked. Those who spent most time with the family were more likely to have stayed on at school after the statutory leaving age (71% compared with 48% for those spending least time) and to have left with some school qualifications (90% compared with 82%).

Among young women, but not men, there was also a relationship between conflict with parents and school success, those who had reported more rows doing less well. For example, only 7% of young women from the lowest conflict group had no school qualifications, compared with 16% from those who reported most conflict.

Occupation and education after school

A higher proportion of young people living with both biological parents became students. However, when financial circumstances were controlled for statistically, men from lone-parent families were just as likely to be students as those living with both biological parents. In contrast, women from families with both biological parents were more likely to be students and less likely to be unemployed or staying at home for other reasons than those from either step- or lone-parent households.

Figure 1 shows that most 'family time' was strongly associated with a greater likelihood of being a student, while unemployment was more common among those who had spent least time with their families. Lesser conflict with parents at age 15 was also associated with a greater likelihood of being a student.

Young women's family formation

As very few young men in the sample had children or were married or cohabiting, the analysis of family formation was restricted to young women. Even after accounting for their generally poorer financial circumstances, young women from step- or lone-parent households were more likely than those from families with both biological parents to have been pregnant by the time they were 18. Once again, there was an association with reason for family disruption.

Early pregnancy (by age 18) was more likely in those who had experienced the death of a parent (40%) compared with whose parents had separated (14%) and those living with both biological parents (6%). However, there were no significant differences between the groups in respect of whether they were married or cohabiting at 21.

Less time spent with the family at age 15 was also associated with early pregnancy: 5% of the women who had spent most time with their families had been pregnant by age 18, with 14% of those who had spent least time. There were no associations between amount of family time and being married or cohabiting at age 21.

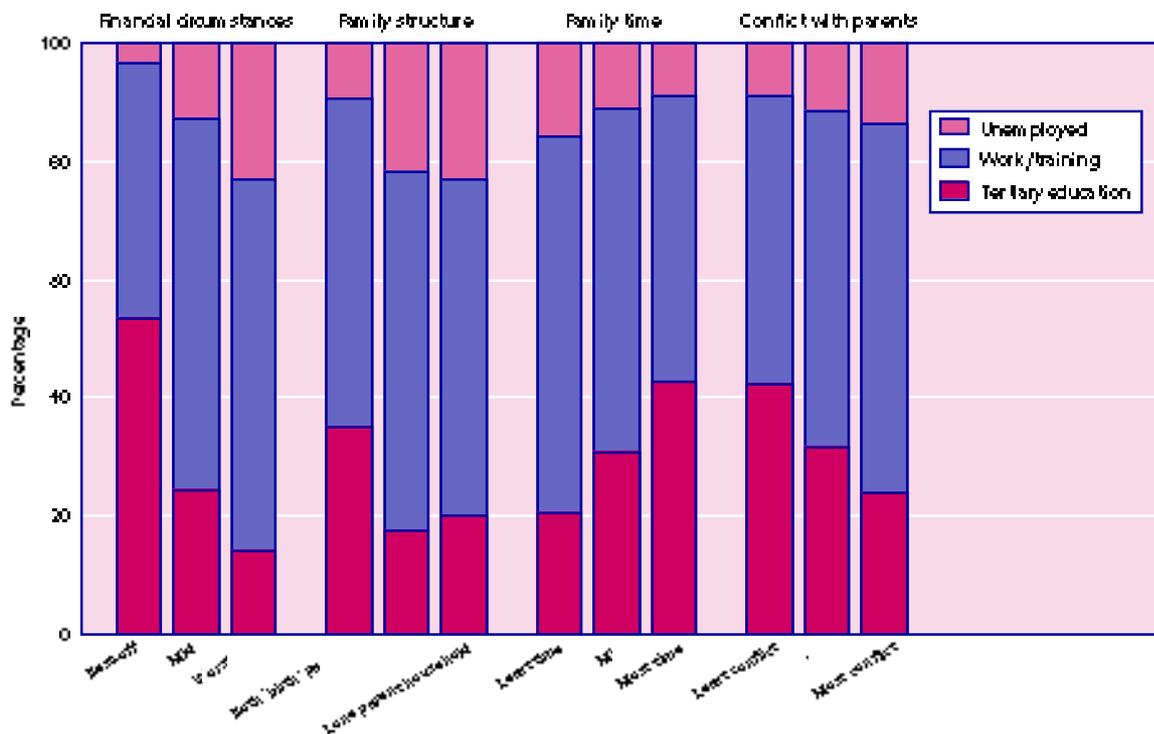
The amount of conflict which a woman had with her parents at age 15 was not related to either early pregnancy or marriage or cohabitation.

Conclusions

For this sample of young people, separate and largely unrelated aspects of family life at age 15 were associated in different ways with other dimensions of their lives three years later. Conflict with parents was the only aspect of family life associated with health and self-esteem. It was also associated with smoking and academic success. Family structure was associated with illicit drug use, academic success and early family formation, but the relationships were stronger for young women than young men, and

Figure 1: Occupation and education after school

Labour market position (%) at age 18 according to financial resources, family structure, family time and conflict with parents at age 15.



there was evidence that the effects of having lost a parent through death differed from loss through separation. However, it was time spent by a young person in activities with the rest of their family which showed the strongest and most consistent relationships with smoking, drug use, success at school or in the labour market and age at first pregnancy

Questions of causality remain. For example, does conflict with parents increase the likelihood that a young person will smoke - or do those who smoke tend to do things which lead to rows with their parents? Why do some young people spend more time with their family than others? Is it something to do with the beliefs or behaviours of their parents - or is it more strongly related to their own personality or lifestyle? While we cannot always be certain of the reasons for the relationships, our results show that both family structure and the dynamics of family life are linked to the future lives and life chances of teenagers.

About the study

This study used data from around 1,000 young people who make up the youth cohort of the *West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study: Health in the Community*. Funded by the Medical Research Council of Great Britain, this is a longitudinal investigation of health and social circumstances in three age cohorts living in and around Glasgow. The youngest cohort were first interviewed in 1987 at the age of 15. Follow-up interviews have been conducted at age 18 (1990) and 23 (1995), and postal questionnaires at age 16 and 21.

At the age of 15, over 80% of the sample lived with both biological parents, around 5% lived in a step-parent family and 12% lived in a one-parent household. For the majority (75%) of those who had experienced family disruption, this was due to parental separation; in the remainder of cases a parent had died.

At age 18, almost one-third of the sample were students (that is, higher or further education), just over half had a full- or part-time job or were on a training scheme, and one in six were unemployed or at home for other reasons.

The information on family life was obtained at

age 15. The rest of the data was collected from the same group of young people at age 18, apart from marriage/cohabitation which was collected at age 21.

As financial resources are not only strongly associated with family structure but also with educational success, post-school destinations and family formation, analyses took account of differing financial circumstances.

Further information

More detailed reports by Helen Sweeting and Patrick West can be found in *Family life and health in adolescence: a role for culture in the health inequalities debate?*, *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 40, pp. 163-175, (1995), and *Young People and their Families: analyses of data from the Twenty-07 Study youth cohort*, MRC Medical Sociology Unit Working Paper No. 49, (1995), available from MRC Medical Sociology Unit, 6 Lilybank Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8RZ. The work forms part of the 'Transitions to Adulthood' project with Martin Richards and Virginia Morrow, University of Cambridge and Kathleen Kiernan, London School of Economics.

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 44** Lone parenthood and family disruption (Jan 94)
- 45** Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)
- 69** Developing work and family services in the workplace (Jan 95)
- 70** Family support for young people setting up home (Jan 95)
- 80** Social backgrounds and post-birth experiences of young parents (Jul 95)
- 84** Single lone mothers (Oct 95)
- 91** A survey of group-based parenting programmes (Jan 96)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 4** Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown (Feb 95)

For further information on these and other

Findings, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 629241.



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