

Ipsos MORI

Policy Exchange 



# FAMILIES IN BRITAIN

The impact of changing family structures and what the public think





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# INTRODUCTION

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In Britain today, both the public and politicians agree that families matter. Four out of five people say that 'my family are more important to me than my friends',<sup>1</sup> and families currently ride high on the policy agendas of both the Labour<sup>2</sup> and the Conservative Parties.<sup>3</sup> One thing that unites everyone in Britain is the need for parents to take more responsibility for their children: 64% of us strongly agree this matters.<sup>4</sup>

Yet 'the family', both in public opinion and as a policy area, is a source of persistent contradictions and trade-offs. Privately, families must balance the competing interests of parents, children and other dependants within the household such as elderly relatives. The traditional single male breadwinner family is declining and the growth of single-parent families and other new kinds of family present many new challenges for government policy on welfare, work-life balance and in many other areas.

This report aims to be a starting point for a debate on policy, charting the changing nature of the family, and what that means for parents, children and our wider society. Drawing on the breadth of the latest new research undertaken by Ipsos MORI with Policy Exchange<sup>5</sup>, and other existing research, we explore the changing shape of families in Britain today, the impact of such changes on society, public opinion on the role of families and the role for government. We highlight the key opportunities for policymakers in light of the challenges suggested by the current demographic, social and attitudinal terrain, and what the public thinks of these options.

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1 Ipsos MORI Real Trends, self-completion and online. Base: 2,019 British adults 16+, 9th May – 5th June 2008.

2 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families.

3 Social Policy Justice Group (2006), 'Fractured Families' Centre for Social Justice.

4 Ipsos MORI Real Trends September 2008.

5 Ipsos MORI and Policy Exchange placed several questions on an omnibus of 2000 people. Fieldwork took place between 9th and 15th January 2009. A qualitative deliberative workshop was held with 15 members of the general public to debate issues in more detail. The workshop took place in February 2009.

# SUMMARY

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## Families have changed

The last 100 years have seen changes in legislation, technology, attitudes and expectations that have led to:

- a massive feminisation of the workforce since the second world war;
- widespread contraception leading to deferred decisions about the start of families; and
- divorce, remarriage and cohabitation becoming much more acceptable.

A relaxation of societal attitudes towards marriage means it is no longer seen as unusual to be involved in a 'complicated' family structure. Families are no longer just made up of married parents living with their children. Although seven in ten households are still headed up by married couples, this proportion has been declining for some time. Families are now a mix of cohabiting parents, stepfamilies, single parent families, those living apart together and civil partnerships, as well as the traditional nuclear family.

## What are the impacts of these changes?

As a result of these changes, families are now less stable than in previous generations. Children often grow up with different parents - in stepfamilies, or with one parent figure missing. These children are more likely to experience poverty, poor health and wellbeing and be involved in antisocial behaviour.

Families will go on evolving. As more women have careers and seek more egalitarian relationships, men and women frequently need to negotiate their roles within the family. This is likely to be heightened as the economic downturn takes its toll on employment and families have to be flexible about who is in work.

## What do the public think about these changes?

A challenge for politicians is that new research shows us the public are divided in their views about families.

- Over the last ten years, **people without children have paid more tax and families raising children have received increased support.** Although slightly more of the general public support this policy (43%) than not (32%), parents support this by two to one (49% versus 24% opposed).
- But there is not a clear consensus among the public. Almost half (48%) of Britons think that **people who choose to have children should not expect other taxpayers to help them with the costs of raising them.** Contrary to current policy, public views are also divided along class and age lines with more working class and older people most opposed, and wealthier and younger people most supportive of this action.

- But at the same time, two in five people (41%) feel that **all taxpayers should contribute something to help with the costs of raising children**. There is a divide in opinion based on social class with half (50%) of those in higher social class households agreeing with this statement compared to over one third (37%) in lower class households.
- Similarly, half of people (50%) think that **anybody with a child should get some government help towards the cost of raising it**, with unsurprisingly more parents (58%) than non parents (47%) agreeing with this statement. But a significant minority believe that **only poor parents should get government help towards the costs of raising their children** (40%).
- Child Benefit is currently paid to every family with dependant children regardless of income. Although more than two in five (43%) people agree with this, three in ten people think that **Child Benefit should only be paid to lower income families** (30%), and just under a quarter (23%) think that it should only be paid to families with children under the age of 16 years.

## The future

If we accept the evidence that suggests that non-traditional families are more likely to lead to poorer outcomes, questions need to be asked about whether the government should incentivise marriage. Recent policy changes have moved away from this, with for example the removal of Married Man's Allowance and the introduction of Working Tax Credit, but does government need to reconsider this? We know the public supports government policy incentivising marriage, despite divorce rates.<sup>6</sup>

In considering what the government can do to support families, we have considered two possible options: providing more support to parents with younger children and making financial payments to families conditional, possibly to target it better.

## Providing more support to parents with younger children

- Almost seven in ten people (67%) believe that **the same level of support should be available to parents regardless of the age of their children**, and only a quarter (24%) feel that support should be increased. Although it is recognised that the cost of raising children is high, particularly when they are new born, it is felt that these costs do not necessarily go away as the child grows, but they transfer into larger payments such as increased household bills, school uniforms or university fees.

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6 ICM Poll (2007) Conducted for The Telegraph.

## Making payments to families conditional

- Almost half of people (49%) support the idea that **parents who fail to bring up their children properly should lose eligibility for family payments**, with just over a quarter (27%) opposing it. Interestingly, parents are most likely to support this idea (54%). This is highly consistent with a widespread belief in British society that parents should take more responsibility for their children (64% strongly agree, only 1% strongly disagree), a feeling that the young have too much freedom and not enough discipline (84% and 72% among 15-29 year olds)<sup>7</sup> and that the most effective way of reducing crime is better parenting, rather than tougher policing or changes to policy.
- Many feel that this type of policy would have a high impact on the lower social classes who *'would come under the searchlight'*. Perhaps unsurprisingly more unemployed people strongly oppose this policy (21%) compared to people who are in work (10%).
- However, despite widespread agreement that parenting is a key problem area, **views on what exactly is 'proper' parenting and how it would be policed are very contentious**. The public agree government should provide parents with the education and information they need in order to be able to raise their children in a 'better environment'. But if parents do not want 'support', many feel the only enforcement that will work is financial penalty or imprisonment, which would ultimately impact on the child, something considered totally unacceptable by most.

While the public accept that 'broken' families, in the sense of divorce, stepfamilies and single parents, are now the norm, and have much more relaxed attitudes towards the institution of marriage than previous generations, marriage continues to be widely viewed as desirable where children are concerned. Although the public want to ensure that provision is available to support families, **opinion is divided on who should pay for that provision, whether provision should be targeted more strictly and whether financial support for families could be made conditional**.

What is clear is that the status quo is fragile. There is still strong support for the ideal of marriage across all social classes,<sup>8</sup> especially where children are concerned. The majority agree it is right for government to encourage it, especially amongst older people. But at the same time, views on how government should intervene in the details of family life and raising children are sensitive and views on financial support are very mixed. For this reason, despite widespread use of the phrase 'hard working families', all political parties need to tread carefully in articulating major changes in family policy.

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<sup>7</sup> Ipsos MORI Real Trends September 2008.

<sup>8</sup> 56% agree it is very important to them personally, only 7% feel it is not important at all. ICM Poll (2007) conducted on behalf of The Telegraph.



The top half of the image features several thick, white, angular lines that intersect to form abstract, geometric shapes. These lines are set against a solid, vibrant blue background. The shapes are reminiscent of stylized architectural elements or perhaps the outlines of a modern building's facade. The lines vary in length and orientation, creating a sense of dynamic movement and depth.

01

Two point four children?  
The shape of British families today.

**A relaxation of societal attitudes towards marriage means it is no longer seen as unusual to be involved in a ‘complicated’ family structure. Families are no longer solely made up of married parents living with their children: nowadays, many families consist of a number of non-traditional structures such as stepfamilies, cohabiting parents, single parents, couples living apart together and civil partnerships. Changes in legislation, women’s entry into the labour market and the development of science and technology have allowed parents greater ability to plan their future and have flexibility in their working patterns.**

### **Introduction**

The structure of the British family has shifted significantly over the last 50 years, and this looks set to continue. This chapter outlines the most significant changes of the past decades and the key reasons for them. These changes have resulted in the decline of marriage and the rise of cohabitation, new forms of family composition, and the delay of parenthood.

### **The decline of marriage and the rise of cohabitation**

Although seven out of ten households are still headed by married couples this percentage has been declining for some time.<sup>9</sup> Between 1996 and 2006 the number of married couple families fell by over 4%, while the number of cohabiting couple families increased by 2.3 million, representing 14% of all families. It is estimated that no more than seven out of ten men and women now in their mid-30s will marry compared to nine out of ten now in their mid-60s.<sup>10</sup> By 2031, projections suggest that these trends will continue and there will be around 3.8 million cohabiting couples, as well as further increases in the number of single parents.<sup>11</sup>

**Pre-marital cohabitation has dramatically increased and become the norm.** In 1960, just 2% of couples were cohabiting before they married, compared to three quarters in 1998.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, many people now marry later, often living with a partner, as a ‘trial marriage’ before making a formal commitment.<sup>13</sup> Chart 1.1 opposite indicates the projected increased trend in cohabitation.

9 Office of National Statistics (2007) ‘Focus on Families’, p3.

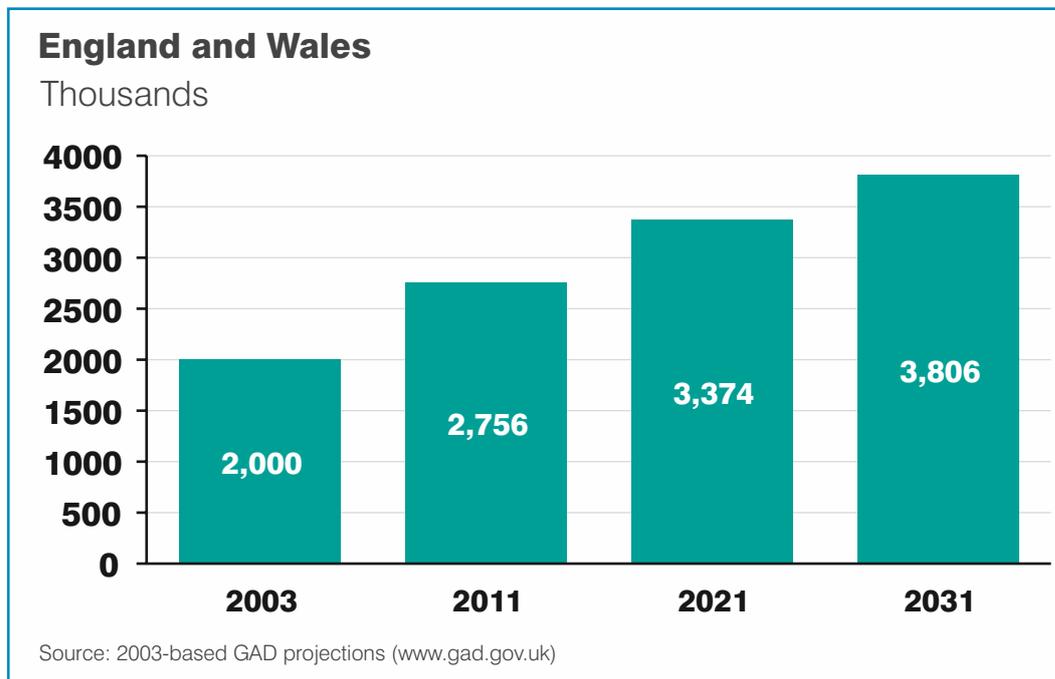
10 Schoen, R. and Canudas-Romo, V. (2005) ‘Timing effects on first marriage: Twentieth-century experience in England and Wales and the USA’ in *Population Studies*, Vol. 59, p135-146.

11 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) ‘Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper’ Department for Children, Schools and Families, p78.

12 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit, (2008) ‘Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper’ Department for Children, Schools and Families, p26.

13 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit, (2008) ‘Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper’ Department for Children, Schools and Families, p25.

**Chart 1.1 Projected cohabiting population 2003-2031**



Increasingly cohabitation is also the case for many families with children: in the decade to 2006 the proportion of couples with children who cohabited rose by a greater percentage than couples who were married, which fell in the same period.<sup>14</sup> As these trends suggest, **fewer and fewer marriages are sustained** with the rate of marriage break-up between couples who have been together for decades hitting a record high.<sup>15</sup> This has been led by 'babyboom emptynesters' who, once their children have grown up and left home, decide there is no longer any reason to remain in a loveless marriage. Women who have been housewives are also starting to be recognised with respectable settlements in the divorce courts, allowing them to end unhappy marriages with greater belief that they will be financially secure on their own. Changes in the law have also made it easier to be able to get a divorce and Britain now has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe and the largest percentage of people in any European nation who have been divorced (around one in six adults).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the number of remarriages has increased as a result of the rise in the divorce rate.

<sup>14</sup> The proportion of married couple families has decreased in the decade from 1996 to 2006, (accounting for 71% of families in 2006, compared with 76% in 1996). Over the same period the proportion of cohabiting couple families increased to 14% from 9%, Office of National Statistics (2007).

<sup>15</sup> Office of National Statistics (2007) 'Overview of Families'.

<sup>16</sup> European Social Survey (2006) Scope: all persons aged 15 and over resident within private households.

At first sight the rising divorce rate among the middle-aged is counter to the broader trend of declining overall numbers of divorces. Data indicates that the number of couples getting a divorce dropped to the lowest rate for 26 years in 2007,<sup>17</sup> which has been linked to the pattern of men and women waiting longer to get married, or indicates that couples are cohabiting without ever getting married.

### New forms of family composition

The changes in marriage, divorce and cohabitation have contributed to the growing number of new types of family. Two in five of all marriages are now remarriages, which makes **stepfamilies** one of the fastest growing family forms in Britain, currently making up one in ten of all families.<sup>18</sup> In the decade to 2006, the number of **single parent families** also increased to 2.3 million, making up 14% of all families.<sup>19</sup> Consequently more and more children are now growing up in single parent families, and in stepfamilies.<sup>20</sup> A growing number of couples are also now **living apart together**, often following failed marriages or cohabitations. Initial estimates suggest that around two million people have regular partners in other households (excluding full-time students and people who live with their parents).<sup>21</sup> In most cases this is either due to working in a different location to the family home or because the relationship is still in the early stages, rather than because couples have made a choice to remain apart.<sup>22</sup> However, women's focus on their career may also be a factor. As women choose to focus on their career before settling into a committed relationship, they are getting married and having children later in life. Finally **civil partnerships** between same sex couples have created a new type of family. By the end of 2007 there had been 26,787 civil partnerships since the law was introduced in December 2005.<sup>23</sup> The chart below demonstrates the key family structures that make up British families.

17 In 2007, the provisional divorce rate in England and Wales fell to 11.9 divorcing people per 1,000 married population compared with the 2006 figure of 12.2. The divorce rate is currently at its lowest level since 1981. Office of National Statistics (2008).

18 Office of National Statistics, (2008) 'Civil Partnerships', cited in; Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit, (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper', Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.26.

19 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008), 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.26.

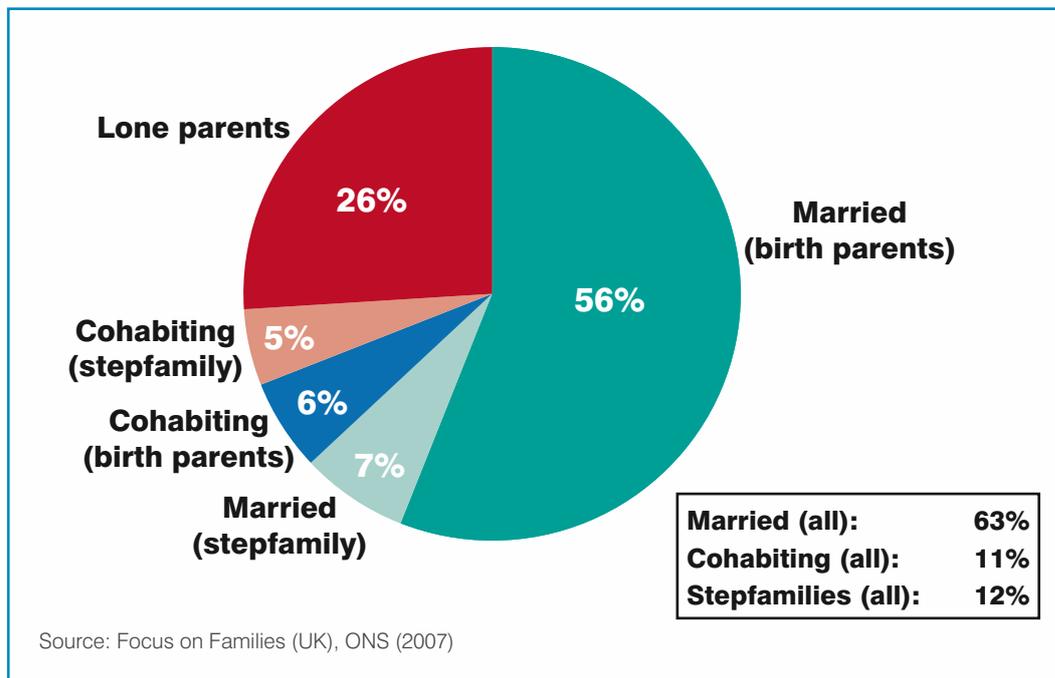
20 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.26.

21 Office of National Statistics (2005) 'Population Trends'.

22 National Centre for Social Research (2008) 'British Social Attitude Survey' London, Sage, p.16.

23 Office of National Statistics (2005) 'Stepfamilies'.

**Chart 1.2 Family structures in the UK**



### Societal ageing and the delay of parenthood

Due to medical advances, and a better standard of living, **people are living longer**. In addition, due to the post-war baby boom population, there are increasing numbers of the population approaching older age. For the first time ever, there are now more people over the age of 60 years than under the age of 16,<sup>24</sup> and families are under increasing pressure to care for elderly family members. Increasing demands on the formal care and support systems means that informal family care will be progressively more depended upon to meet the needs of the elderly generation. Having an elderly relative with long-term support needs can place an overwhelming pressure on families, especially if they need to live within the family home. This also has implications for the amount of paid work the carer can undertake.

Better access to education, control over reproduction and increasing access to careers, means that **women are choosing to have children later** once their careers are established, and also choosing to have fewer children, in order that they can return to their career. Despite this, Britain still has one of the **highest teenage pregnancy rates in western Europe**. Although there has been an overall downturn in the number of teenage pregnancies in the last 10 years, recently this has started to rise. In 2007, there were more than 42,900 conceptions in under-18s,<sup>25</sup> and almost 8,200 pregnancies in under-16s. This recent rise in conception rates is the first increase since 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Office of National Statistics (2008) Mid Year Population Statistics.

<sup>25</sup> Office of National Statistics, cited at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/health/7911684.stm>

## What has contributed to family change?

In recent times we have seen changes in social norms and a relaxation in attitudes towards sex, changes in legislation surrounding divorce and civil partnerships, more women working and advances in science and technology. As a result of all of these factors, the structure of families in Britain has changed.

## Changes in social norms and relaxation in attitudes towards sex

Traditional families are increasingly being replaced by a variety of non-traditional family structures such as stepfamilies, cohabiting parents, and single parents. Attitudes towards these new kinds of family structures have become increasingly relaxed as they have become more common. For example, **seven out of ten people think that ‘pre-marital sex is rarely or not wrong at all’, up from five out of ten as recently as 1984.**

Two thirds of people agree that ‘there is little difference socially between being married and living together’, with less than one in five disagreeing (19%) and a slightly smaller majority think that ‘living with a partner shows just as much commitment as getting married’ (48% agreeing to 35% disagreeing).<sup>26</sup>

These findings may be associated with the incorrect belief by many that unmarried couples who live together as if married are entitled to the same rights as married couples.<sup>27</sup> However, a significant minority of couples are sceptical of the need to marry at all, with almost one in ten (9%) of the population believing that ‘there is no point getting married - it’s only a piece of paper’.<sup>28</sup>

As attitudes towards marriage have evolved, some religious leaders have been forced to acknowledge these changes and have had to talk about the issues of sexual activity, most notably the ideology of ‘no sex before marriage’. Although strict religious beliefs about sexual activity outside of marriage continue to be upheld, it has informally become tacit. Alongside this there has been a reduction in the proportion of the population with strong religious beliefs, and a relaxation of attitudes towards sex both within religion and society more generally has influenced the delay in marriage, or its abandonment completely.

26 Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) ‘New Families? Tradition and change in modern relationships’ in National Centre for Social Research ‘British Social Attitudes Survey’ The 24th Report, London: Sage, p. 5.

27 See Barlow, A., Duncan, S., James, G. and Park, A. (2001), ‘Just a piece of paper? Marriage and cohabitation.’ In British Social Attitudes: Public policy, social ties. The 18th Report: 2001-2002 Edition. London: Sage.

28 Barlow, A., Duncan, S., James, G. and Park, A. (2001), ‘Just a piece of paper? Marriage and cohabitation’ In British Social Attitudes: Public policy, social ties. The 18th Report: 2001-2002 Edition. London: Sage.

## Changes in legislation, including divorce and civil partnerships

Whether legislation drives social norms is a matter of debate, but there can be no doubt it can be a catalyst for social change. The number of divorces spiked upwards after the 1969 Divorce Reform Act which introduced the single ground of irretrievable breakdown, for divorce.<sup>29</sup> Today, three in five people think that the divorce rate is higher because it is now easier than it was previously, whereas one in five thinks it is because marriage is less successful today.<sup>30</sup> **The stigma of divorce has also dissipated considerably:** today nearly two thirds (63%) of people think it can be a positive first step towards a new life.<sup>31</sup>

**Changes in legislation have also allowed for the formalisation of entirely new kinds of families.** The introduction of civil partnerships is the most powerful example, but the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, which has allowed lesbian parents to have their own biological children, and anti-discrimination laws around adoption, have also allowed gay couples to become families with children. In 2007, new legislation made it illegal for publicly funded adoption agencies to discriminate against gay couples. However, despite this, there are still very few gay families with children. In 2007/8, just 80 gay couples adopted children compared to 2,840 heterosexual couples.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, figures from 2006 show that only 0.5% of women receiving IVF cycles were registered as lesbian.<sup>33</sup>

Changes in legislation have also contributed to lasting changes in women's employment circumstances. The removal of the 'marriage bar' in 1973 meant women in the public and civil services were no longer required to resign upon marriage, and the Sex Discrimination Act gave women important rights in the workplace that have, to some extent, enabled their greater labour market participation in recent decades. This has had an important effect on the division of labour within families.

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29 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.25.

30 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.35.

31 Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) 'New Families? Tradition and change in modern relationships' in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p.11.

32 Community Care website, 'Vulnerable children still waiting too long for placements', 5th November 2008, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2008', accessed at <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2008/11/05/109856/gay-couples-overlooked-in-adopters-shortage.html>

33 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (2008) 'A long term analysis of the HFEA Register data'.

## Understanding family law

In some ways public attitudes are now ahead of legislation. The legal rights of those who are married and cohabiting provides an important example: **half of the general public incorrectly believe that ‘common law’ marriage exists.**<sup>34</sup> Yet, at the same time, two in three of the public feel that marriage provides more security than cohabitation. This indicates that public attitudes and behaviour are out of step with current law. For example, despite indicating that marriage provides more security, the data shows that people broadly feel that a separation in a cohabiting relationship should be treated similarly to marriage, dependant on: their ‘relationship duration’; how much the less well-off partner has invested in the relationship; and where cohabitation ‘looks’ most like marriage. In these cases, the public feel that there should be high level support for similar legal treatment for cohabiting and married couples.<sup>35</sup>

The Law Commission would like to see couples who have been cohabiting for at least two years given the same rights as married couples as a majority of people believe in the existence of ‘common law marriage’ and often fail to take adequate legal steps to safeguard their finances in the event of a break-up or death.<sup>36</sup> Such a change however would remove one of the remaining incentives for couples to marry. Nevertheless, the public generally support this change as long as the couple have been together for a long time, although two in five (38%) people would support this if the couple had been together for just two years even if ‘one has a much higher income than the other and owns the family home’.<sup>37</sup>

**Where children are involved, public views are much more polarised.** Roughly the same proportion of people agree (42%) as disagree (41%) that one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents, and only one in five (19%) are of the view that a gay male couple are as capable of being good parents as a man and a woman, although this figure rises to almost half (47%) for those respondents who have a close personal knowledge of a gay man or lesbian.<sup>38</sup> As the authors of the survey note, ‘children seem to hold a particular ‘morally absolute’ position in people’s attitude to family’ and that ‘while less fixed and definite family arrangements may find widespread acceptance when it comes to adults, this is less likely to be the case when children are involved’.<sup>39</sup>

34 Barlow, A., Burgoyne, C., Smithson, J., and Clery, E. (2008) ‘Cohabitation and the law: myths, money and the media’, in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage.

35 Barlow, A., Burgoyne, C., Smithson, J., and Clery, E. (2008) ‘Cohabitation and the law: myths, money and the media’, in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage

36 Barlow, A., Burgoyne, C., Smithson, J., and Clery, E. (2008) ‘Cohabitation and the law: myths, money and the media’, in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p41.

37 Barlow, A., Burgoyne, C., Smithson, J., and Clery, E. (2008) ‘Cohabitation and the law: myths, money and the media’, in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p45.

38 Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) ‘New Families: Tradition and change in modern relationships’ in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p17.

39 Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) ‘New Families: Tradition and change in modern relationships’ in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p26.

Twenty years ago, seven in ten people believed that 'people who want children ought to get married', however, in 2008, this has fallen to just five in ten.<sup>40</sup> Yet, **although the public no longer feel as strongly that there is a need to get married, marriage continues to be viewed as positive when children are involved.** Seven in ten people believe 'it is better for parents of children to be married rather than unmarried' (16% disagree).<sup>41</sup>

Attitudes towards divorce are similarly coloured by the presence of children. Divorce itself is not considered a particular problem any more: more than three quarters (78%) of people agree that 'it is not divorce that harms children, but conflict between their parents' (only 7% disagree). However, public opinion is split on whether it should be harder to divorce if children are under 16 years.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the legislation, nine in ten people think that children should be the priority when managing a separation.<sup>43</sup>

### The mass employment of women

One of the key drivers behind society's attitudinal change towards the roles within families has been the increase of women in the labour market. In recent times, changes in society including improved educational access for women, legislative change, and shifting social attitudes towards gender roles, have all paved the way for women's mass entry into the labour market. Between 1971 and 2008 women's employment rate increased from 59% to 70% (whilst men's fell from 95% to 79%).<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of their involvement in the labour market, women still carry the large burden of care and domestic responsibility within the family.<sup>45</sup> Although care is vital to the functioning of a family, the responsibilities of care can have a large cost to the individual. Women face substantial penalties, in terms of pay and progression, for taking time out of the labour market or reducing their working hours to care for children or other relatives.<sup>46</sup>

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40 National Centre for Social Research (2008) 'British Social Attitude Survey' London, Sage.

41 ICM opinion poll July 2007 on behalf of the Sunday Telegraph, cited on the BBC News website, 1st August 2007, 'Poll Watch 2007' at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6925639.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6925639.stm)

42 Almost two in five disagree and one in three agree. Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) 'New Families: Tradition and change in modern relationships' in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage p11.

43 ICM interviewed a random sample of 1021 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 4th - 6th July 2008

44 Office of National Statistics (2008) 'Working Lives' accessed at [www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1654](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1654), cited in Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families. p42.

45 Gornick, J., and Meyers, M. (2003) 'Families that Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment' New York: Russell Sage.

46 Women and Work Commission (2006) 'Shaping a Fairer Future', London: Women and Work Commission.

## Drivers of parental engagement and progression in the labour market

More women than ever are now able to combine both a family and a career. The current Government has advocated the economic and social benefits of being a working mother through the introduction of a number of initiatives designed to help women with children back into the workforce. These have included:

- extending paid maternity leave from 18 to 29 weeks’;
- introducing a further optional 12 weeks’ unpaid maternity leave;
- introducing paid paternity leave and additional paternity leave;
- introducing the right to request flexible working for carers and parents with children under 16 years;
- the ability to claim up to 80% of childcare costs; and,
- increasing the provision of childcare through the launch of a National Childcare Strategy.

However, **despite undertaking paid employment, some women feel it is their role to be the primary carer for their children.** Indeed, a woman’s own perception of her role is as important a constraint on labour market activities as any other, restricting the amount of time available to pursue their career. For example, the long hours and intensity of senior positions can act as a deterrent for mothers seeking promotions for which they are qualified.<sup>47</sup>

When seeking to combine employment and care responsibilities, more often than not childcare is highlighted as the barrier to entering into the labour market. However, there are many interdependencies that shape parents’ choice and ability to work. These include employment practices; family friendly policies; access to training; partner support; the balance of roles within the household; the availability of family support; and societal pressure.<sup>48</sup>

Single parents, often mothers, find it particularly difficult to secure and sustain professional employment that fits with their care responsibilities. The single parent employment rate is currently 56%, compared to 72% for women in two parent households and 91% for men in two parent households.<sup>49</sup> Given that worklessness is a key determinant of child poverty, the government has committed to moving 70% of single parents into work by 2010. The recent removal of Income Support for single parents with older children will enforce a change in the way single parents think and behave towards work. However, single parents often face enhanced barriers in moving into employment and the right support needs to be available. In “Ready for work: full employment in our generation”<sup>50</sup> the government outlined the additional measures to help with this transition. These included: a guaranteed job interview for all single parents seeking work; extended work trials; access to In Work Credit; and the opportunity to attend Options and Choices Events.

47 Gornick, J. and M. Meyers (2003) ‘Families that Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment’ New York: Russell Sage.

48 See Jenkins, S. (2004) ‘Gender, Place and the Labour Market’ Hampshire, Ashgate.

49 Office of National Statistics (March 2009) ‘Work and Worklessness among households’, Labour Force Survey.

50 Department of Work and Pensions, (2007) ‘Ready for work: full employment in our generation’ London: HMSO.

## The impact of science and technology

Alongside these social and legislative changes, science and technology have also played a part in reshaping the family, most notably by allowing families, especially women, to have greater control and flexibility over their daily lives and an ability to plan for the future:

- 1.** The introduction of **reliable contraceptives** such as the pill means women have greater control and choice in their family planning. Families are able to plan to a greater degree, when to have children to fit in with their employment, family circumstances, and financial stability. This has frequently led to a deferment of motherhood and smaller family sizes.
- 2.** The **technological advancement of household appliances** has reduced the time and effort required to maintain a household. Although not detracting from the fact that domestic chores still need to be undertaken, the amount of time it takes to do those tasks has reduced and become more flexible allowing women the opportunity to consider employment outside of the family home.
- 3.** The introduction and **development of technology, particularly computers**, has dramatically increased flexibility in employment opportunities. Many parents are now able to combine working at home with parental responsibilities.



The background is a solid orange color. Overlaid on this are several thick, white, geometric lines that form a series of interconnected, angular shapes. These lines create a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized architectural structure or a series of overlapping planes. The lines are primarily oriented vertically and diagonally, creating a dynamic composition.

02

What has been the impact of  
the changing family structure?

**Families are now less stable than in previous generations. Children often grow up with different parents - in stepfamilies, or with one parent figure missing. As a result, there is considerable evidence that suggests these children are more likely to experience poverty, poor health and wellbeing and be involved in antisocial behaviour.**

**Families will go on evolving. As more women have careers and seek more egalitarian relationships, men and women frequently need to negotiate their roles within the family. This is likely to be heightened as the economic downturn takes its toll on employment and families have to be flexible about who is at work.**

### **Introduction**

The impact of new family compositions and the changing dynamic within families has had different effects upon children, mothers, fathers, and other dependant groups within the family, such as the elderly and disabled. In this chapter, we will explore the impact of changes in the family in five key areas: family stability; health and wellbeing; levels of poverty; balance of work and care; and involvement in antisocial behaviour.

### **Family stability**

The decline of traditional family forms has led to an increase in family instability. Non-traditional families such as stepfamilies and cohabiting parents are more prone to breaking down. Divorce in Britain is high and stepfamilies are a growing form. As the majority of children stay with their mother, four in five stepfamilies consist of a natural mother and a stepfather. Just under half of stepfamilies also have their own children within the family as well as stepchildren.<sup>51</sup> However, **more than half of remarriages involving children end in divorce and one in four stepfamilies break down in the first year** regardless of whether they have married or not.<sup>52</sup> In addition, **nearly one in two cohabiting parent families split up before their child's fifth birthday compared to one in twelve married parents**, and three quarters of family breakdowns affecting young children now involve unmarried parents.<sup>53</sup> This means that the structure of a family can change several times while a child is growing up. This lack of stability has been linked to other issues such as poverty, poor health and antisocial behaviour.

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51 Office of National Statistics (2008) 'Stepfamilies'.

52 Social Policy Justice Group (2006) 'Fractured Families' Centre for Social Justice, p15.

53 Social Policy Justice Group (2006) 'Fractured Families' Centre for Social Justice, p13.

### Certain kinds of family are more likely to be affected by poverty

A family's income makes a huge impact upon the experiences of the people within it. The Millennium Cohort Study found that there was not only a strong link between single parents and poverty but also cohabitation: 30% of cohabiting respondents were in poverty compared to 15% of married couples.<sup>54</sup>

Living in poverty can lead to further issues for the future of the children such as low aspiration and educational achievement and consequently multiple disadvantage and poor life chances.<sup>55</sup> **Single parents especially are at much greater risk of multiple disadvantage** and are at least twice as likely to live in poverty compared to couple parents.<sup>56</sup>

Previous family status can also impact on family income. Research using British Household Panel Survey data from 1998-2004 found that after a marital split mothers are on average 12% worse off the following year.<sup>57</sup> This has improved significantly though from the 1991-1997 dataset when divorced mothers' income dropped on average by a third.<sup>58</sup> The improvement is attributed to rising rates of employment for women with children over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s which was further boosted by the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) in 1998.<sup>59</sup> This is now known as the Working Tax Credit, and tops up low income for those people working more than 16 hours a week.

Many believe that work has a huge impact on the likelihood that single parents will be living in poverty. As the figures demonstrate, seven in ten (72%) single parents not working live in poverty, compared to three in ten (27%) who are in part-time work and two in ten (17%) for those in full-time work.<sup>60</sup> However, in a recent report, ippr argues that 'work is not always a solution – over half of poor children live with a parent who works, and many families simply swap one type of poverty for another when they find employment. Measures to tackle in-work poverty such as improving job quality and strengthening progression routes are therefore vital.'<sup>61</sup>

The overall health of the economy naturally has an impact on families. Financial tensions often create family tensions, and may be a factor in family breakdown.<sup>62</sup> In the **current economic climate**, families, like individuals, are facing growing anxiety over rising costs and debt. Ipsos MORI found that the current context has had different effects on women compared to men: in general women experience more anxiety about family finances and

54 Cabinet Office/The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p72.

55 Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF)/ Cabinet Office (2008) 'Think Family: Improving the life chances of families at risk' accessed at [www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policyhub/news\\_item/families\\_risk08.asp](http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policyhub/news_item/families_risk08.asp)

56 Derived from the Family Resources Survey and cited in Social Policy Justice Group (2006), 'Fractured Families' Centre for Social Justice, p34.

57 Jarvis, S and Jenkins, S., (1999) 'The Income Consequences of a Marital Split: Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey', Population Studies 53(2): 237-254.

58 Jarvis, S and Jenkins, S., (1999) 'The Income Consequences of a Marital Split: Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey', Population Studies 53(2): 237-254.

59 Jarvis, S and Jenkins, S., (1999) 'The Income Consequences of a Marital Split: Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey', Population Studies 53(2): 237-254.

60 Derived from the Family Resources Survey and cited in Social Policy Justice Group (2006), 'Fractured Families' London: Centre for Social Justice, p34.

61 Oppenheim, C. & Lawton, K (2009) 'The fight to end child poverty', London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

62 BBC News website, 6th December 2008, 'Downturn puts strain on couples', accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7768674.stm>.

the downturn seems to be increasing tensions over finances for couples more generally.<sup>63</sup> The downturn has also led to a high number of redundancies across all sectors and unemployment is anticipated to continue rising. At the same time, the number of vacancies has also fallen to its lowest level since 2001.<sup>64</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that seven in ten of the public cite the economy as the most important issue facing Britain today.<sup>65</sup> Concern about unemployment and redundancies is also increasing with half of those in work stating they are worried about losing their jobs.<sup>66</sup>

Looking forward, **the public are pessimistic about the economy.** Less than one in five people (17%) feel the economic condition of the country will improve in the next twelve months, down from one in four (24%) in October 2008. Conversely, seven in ten people (68%) think the economy will get worse, an increase from six in ten (59%) in October. Despite public pessimism about the economy, fewer people are so concerned about their own personal finances, with just under half (45%) thinking their personal financial circumstances will stay the same over the next 12 months. Two in five (39%) think their circumstances will get worse, and only 14% feel they will improve.<sup>67</sup> Although all members of the population are worried about the impact of changes in the economy, concerns about finances are most pronounced for families with low incomes. For example, two in five of families with an annual income of less than £15,000 have suffered from cold homes due to high energy costs.<sup>68</sup>

### **Certain kinds of family are more likely to experience poor health and wellbeing**

In some cases, the family structure is thought to be important for certain health outcomes. Evidence suggests that children in two parent households have better health and educational outcomes, while due to a combination of environmental factors, poverty and familial instability, it is widely acknowledged that raising children as a single parent can be incredibly difficult. As a result it is unsurprising that children in these families are more likely to suffer from ill health than those in two parent households. For example, children of single parents whether single or widowed, are twice as likely to have a mental health problem (16%) as those living with married or cohabiting couples (8%).<sup>69</sup>

Married parents are happier with their lives, with nine in ten married parents rating their life satisfaction as 7 out of 10 or higher compared to eight of ten cohabiting parents and six of ten single mothers.<sup>70</sup> This is probably because married parents are likely to have higher incomes and are therefore able to live in areas with less deprivation and have a degree of disposable income for treats in their weekly shopping or leisure activities.

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63 Government Equalities Office/ Ipsos MORI (2009) 'The Economic Downturn – the Concerns and Experiences of Women and Families' London: Government Equalities Office.

64 Office for National Statistics.

65 Ipsos MORI Monthly Issues Index, January 2009.

66 Ipsos MORI Monthly Issues Index, January 2009.

67 Ipsos MORI Political Monitor, November 2008.

68 Save the Children (February 2008) '1 in 5 families can't afford heating, new survey reveals', accessed at [http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/41\\_4165.htm](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/41_4165.htm).

69 The Camelot Foundation (2005) 'The Truth Hurts: Report of the National Enquiry into Self-Harm among Young People' London: The Camelot Foundation.

70 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families. p71.

## Most families experience tension over paid work and care

Families play a crucial role in the provision of care and support for both young children and elderly friends and relatives. Care has been viewed historically as women's work by both society and state.<sup>71</sup> However, the entry of women into the workplace has had an impact on the balance of work and care in the family. As female labour market engagement has increased and the structure of families has changed, more employees than in previous generations have care responsibilities to balance with the challenges of working life. Almost all families rely on informal childcare at one stage in their life.<sup>72</sup> Much of this informal childcare will be undertaken by partners, friends or family, more often than not, women. Moreover, it is often expected that the woman will negotiate her working arrangements in order to accommodate childcare responsibilities.

But children are not the only dependant group to receive informal care and support from the family. Currently nearly 465,000 people receive Carer's Allowance for looking after someone with care and support needs for more than 35 hours a week. However, it is estimated that at least five million people in England today already provide care and support for family members or friends.<sup>73</sup> As people are living longer, demand for informal care from family, friends and community members is projected to rise by 40% by 2022.<sup>74</sup> However, childlessness in Britain has been increasing in recent years, a trend that, if it continues may provide a new set of challenges for the care of older people who do not have family relations to rely upon.<sup>75</sup>

## Involvement in antisocial behaviour

Deprivation and antisocial behaviour are linked,<sup>76</sup> and as such it is more likely that certain kinds of families, notably single parent families, experience deprivation and poverty. They are also more likely to experience crime: for example vandalism, graffiti and deliberate damage to property are reported more by single parents than couple families (25% compared to 14%).<sup>77</sup> Although there is no data to date to suggest that certain family types are more likely to have children involved in antisocial or criminal behaviour, it seems logical that those parents experiencing deprivation are more likely to find their children involved in antisocial and also criminal behaviour. This may be related to emotional and health outcomes of living in poverty: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, affects children in as many as one in five families in deprived areas, compared with the national average of 3% to 8% of school-age children<sup>78</sup>, and as a result parents face a greater struggle in controlling the challenging behaviour of their children.

71 Ungerson, C. (1983) 'Why do women care?' in Finch, J. and Groves, D. (eds) *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring* London: Routledge/ Kegan Paul.

72 Perrons, D., McDowell, L., Fagan, C., Ray, K., Ward., K. (2006) 'Introduction: work, life, time and the new economy' in *Gender Divisions and Working Time in the New Economy*, Perrons, D., McDowell, L., Fagan, C., Ray, K., Ward., K. (eds.) Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

73 HM Government (2008) 'The case for change: why England needs a new care and support system' Maher, J., and Green, H. (2002) 'Carers 2000' London: Stationery Office.

74 Cabinet Office (2008) *Realising Britain's Potential: Future Strategic Challenges for Britain*. London: Stationery Office.

75 Office of National Statistics (2008) 'Benefits and Challenges of an Ageing Population' *Population Trends* 130.

76 Millie, A., Jacobson, J., McDonald, E. and Hough, M. (2005) 'Anti-social behaviour strategies: Finding a balance' York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

77 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families. p71.

78 Nixon, J., Parr, S. and Hunter, C. (2006) 'The longer-term outcomes associated with families who had worked with Intensive Family Support Projects', London: Centre for Social Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University/ Department of Communities and Local Government.





# 03

What do the public think about these changes to family life?

**While the public accept that non-traditional families such as divorced, stepfamilies and single parents are now the norm, and they have much more relaxed attitudes towards the institution of marriage than previous generations, marriage continues to be widely viewed as desirable where children are concerned. Although the public want to ensure that provision is available to support families, opinion is divided on who should pay for that provision, and whether provision should be more targeted using criteria based on financial circumstances or parental behaviour.**

### **Introduction**

Public attitudes are important because they drive changes in society: families have changed not only because of external pressures, but because values and attitudes have shifted over time. Legislation often follows to formalise shifting public opinions. From regularly undertaking research with the general public, Ipsos MORI is aware of the strong public opinion towards those in need. This is particularly true when children are involved, as their wellbeing is considered of paramount importance. We have found that the public accept the changes in family structures from traditional married couples to more informal, non-traditional relationships. Furthermore, many women, and some men, aspire towards more egalitarian (if not equal) relationships. In this chapter, we examine the evidence of public attitudes towards changes in family structure and other spheres influenced by family change outlined in the previous chapter.

### **What do people think about family stability and changed family forms?**

Public attitudes towards the family have changed to reflect the changes in society. Different forms of family are increasingly accepted as equivalent to the traditional family: almost three in five (58%) people agree that 'civil partners should have the same rights as married couples' while only one in five (27%) disagree.<sup>79</sup> The public have a strong sense that there are many different kinds of families these days, and that **the term 'family' no longer fits with traditional perceptions of a married couple with children.**<sup>80</sup>

***'There are so many different types of families these days ... it depends on who we're talking about.'***

Single mother, 35-55 years

The public openly accept that many families are no longer formed of nuclear units with married parents living with their children within one family home. Rather, families are made up of many differing forms notably stepfamilies and single parents. The public feel that in contrast to previous generations it is no longer looked down upon to be divorced or be involved in a 'complicated' relationship. Most people know at least one, if not many, friends or family, who are part of these new family structures.

79 Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2008) 'New Families: Tradition and change in modern relationships' in British Social Attitudes Survey, The 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, London: Sage, p. 20.

80 Ipsos MORI deliberative workshop held 9th February 2009.

***'Most people my age are either divorced or separated.'***

Divorced father, 35-55 years

Although the evidence suggests that people are both aware and accepting of different types of family, at the same time the considerable majority of people have a strong personal aspiration to be part of more traditional family forms. **People may no longer consider marriage a necessity but that does not mean they think it is unimportant.** Less than one in ten (9%) people think that 'marriage is just a piece of paper' and half (54%) see marriage as the best form of relationship and four in five people feel that the 'institution of marriage is important to them personally'.<sup>81</sup>

### **Awareness of existing support for families**

The public are able to identify an array of support available to parents. Many have heard of support even if they did not know its correct name or fully understand what it was. For example *'the trust fund grant thingy for babies'*, and *'the family tax credit'*. Awareness is high around support that is available for, or through, school. For example, help with the cost of school uniforms, free school meals and the provision of milk for younger children. Awareness is low around employment rights such as the right to request flexible working, maternity/paternity leave and pay. What is more, it is generally perceived that this support is provided by an employer rather than by the government. Despite being aware of much of the support available to parents, few know who would be eligible or how to access it.

Awareness of, and access to, the welfare system is continuously an issue for families. Ipsos MORI regularly undertakes research with the general public and consistently finds that the public lack awareness of the support, both financial and otherwise, that is available to them should they need it.<sup>82</sup> This means that there is often a shortfall in the official statistics between those who are claiming a particular benefit, and those who would be eligible to claim. In addition, there are members of society who do not want to claim state benefits despite being financially stretched. This has recently been noticed amongst professionals who have been made redundant in the current economic climate who are sometimes initially reluctant to claim welfare benefits.

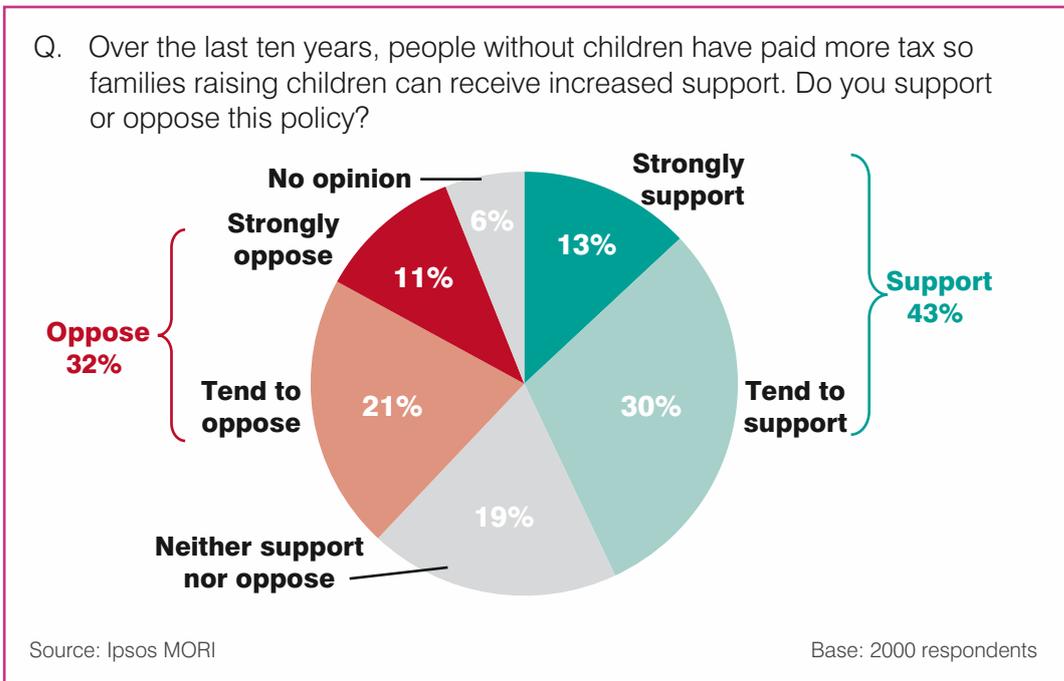
81 Source: ICM opinion poll July 2007 on behalf of the Sunday Telegraph, cited on the BBC News website, 1st August 2007, 'Poll Watch 2007' at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6925639.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6925639.stm)

82 See Hall, S. (2009) 'Spending priorities in the benefit system: deliberative research with the public', DWP Research Report 559.

### Should government provide support for families?

Many of the public feel that those who are working and earning have a responsibility to pay into the public purse to support others particularly the vulnerable and innocent such as children or people with a disability. In the UK, spending on families has accelerated rapidly since 1990, even more so under the current Government. Between 1997 and 2003 spending on 'child-contingent' support rose by more than 50% in real terms to £22 billion.<sup>83</sup> Chart 3.1 indicates the split of public opinion in whether they support increased government spending on families.

**Chart 3.1 Should the government provide increased support for families?**

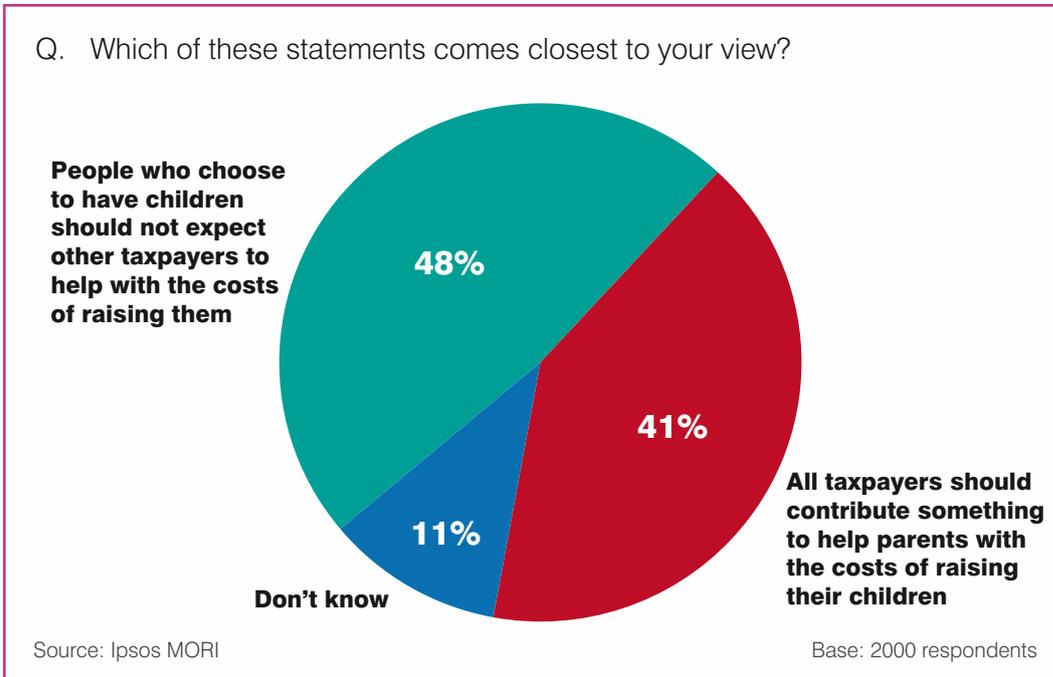


Although slightly more people support this policy (four in ten) than not (three in ten), views are more polarised among parents; almost half (49%) support this policy, and only a quarter (24%) oppose it. Notably, two in five (41%) non parents also support this policy.

In general the public strongly support helping the most vulnerable in society, however chart 3.2 indicates that they are split as to whether this should include parents. Almost half (48%) of Britons think that **people who have children should not expect other taxpayers to help with the cost of raising them**. Contrary to current policy, public views are also divided along class and age lines with more working class and older people most opposed, and wealthier and younger people most supportive of this action.

83 Adam, S. and Brewer, M., (2004) 'Supporting Families' Policy Press.

**Chart 3.2 Should all taxpayers support the cost of raising children?**



However, this chart also illustrates that over half of people do not necessarily agree with this view. Two in five people (41%) feel that all taxpayers should contribute something to help with the costs of raising children. There is a divide in opinion based on social class with half (50%) of those in higher social class households agreeing with this statement compared with just over one third (37%) in lower class households. Significantly, more parents (46%) than non parents (39%) agreed with this statement, however there was no difference between married and non-married couples. This highlights that the division of public opinion is not clear cut, and the responsibility for raising children is shared between the state and the parents.

***'People in work can support [other] families.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

***'If you have children, it's your responsibility to look after them.'***

Father, 35-55 years

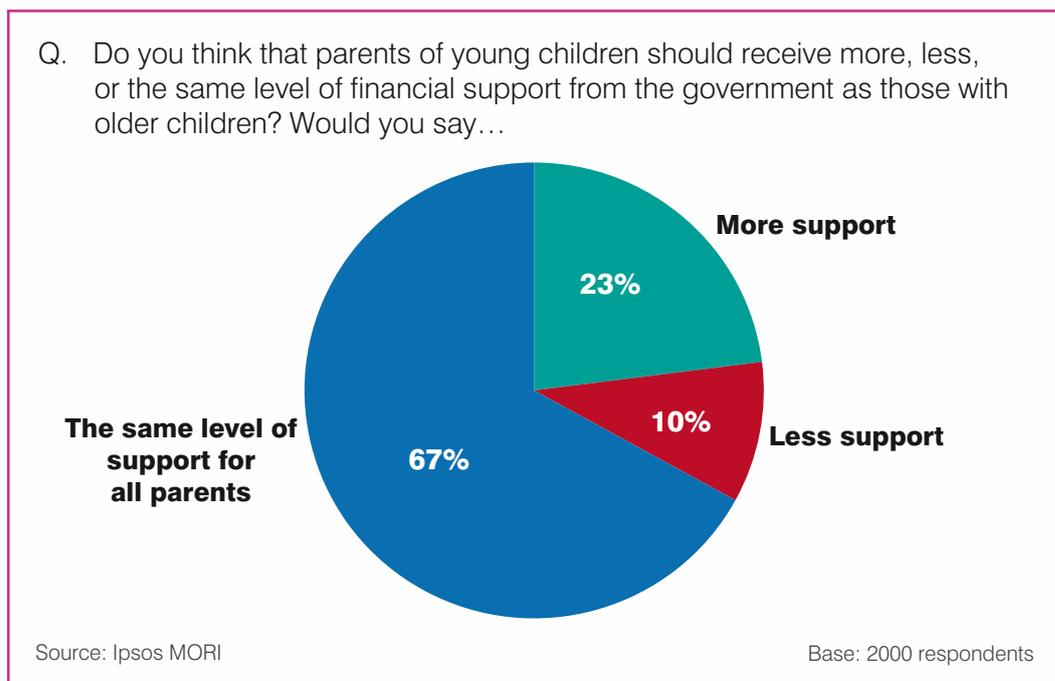
### Should all families receive government support?

If the provision of support for families was to be divided to provide additional support for those with more need, there are two main groups to consider: families with younger children and lower income families.

#### Families with younger children

Raising children is expensive, no more so than when they are first born. However, it is felt that these costs do not necessarily go away as the child grows, rather they transfer into larger payments such as increased household bills, school uniform or university fees. Almost seven in ten (67%) people feel that **the level of support for families should be the same regardless of the age of the child** and less than a quarter (23%) feel that support should be increased.

#### Chart 3.3 Should increased financial support be available for families with younger children?

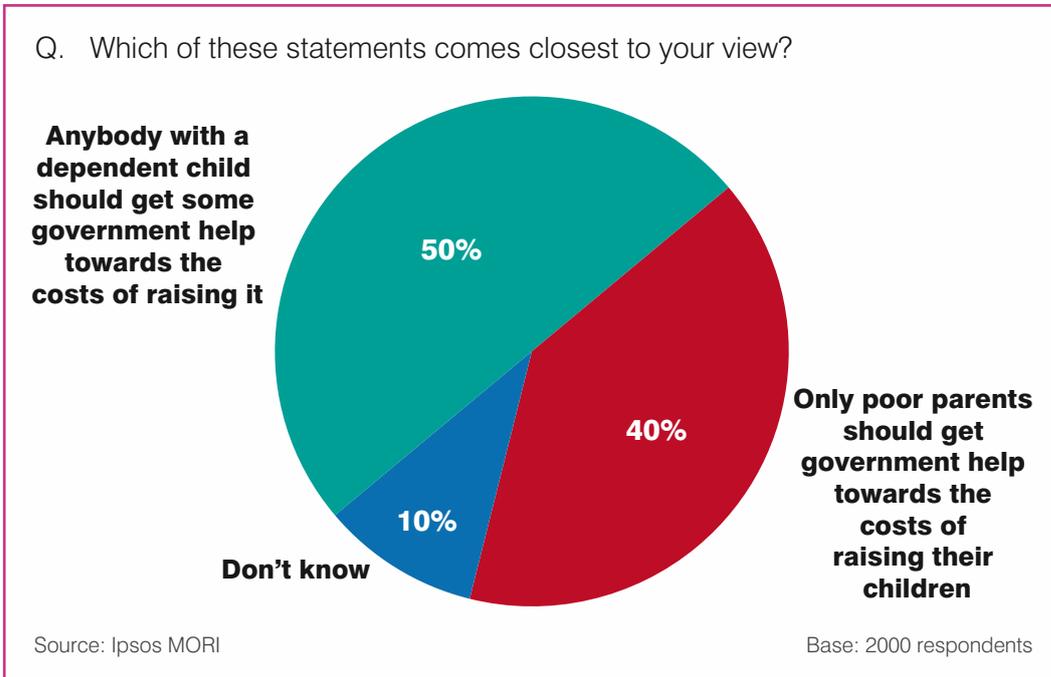


More non parents (68%) feel that there should be the same level of support for all parents, compared with 62% of parents.

#### Families with lower incomes

There is currently a variety of support available to parents, both financial and non-financial including Child Benefit, Child Trust Fund, Children's Centres, free school meals and nursery places. Some benefits such as Working Tax Credit are means tested, providing additional financial support to poorer families. Chart 3.4 illustrates that public opinion is divided on whether all parents, or **only those with low incomes should receive government help with the cost of raising children**.

**Chart 3.4 Should financial support only be available to poor parents?**



Half of people (50%) think that anybody with a child should get some government help towards the cost of raising it, with unsurprisingly more parents (57%) than non parents (47%) agreeing with this statement. But a significant minority believe that only poor parents should get government help towards the costs of raising their children (40%). Significantly more non parents (43%) than parents (33%) agreed with this.

When exploring this further, opinion continues to be split but most tended to agree that the government should provide support when families faced financial difficulty, others feeling that this penalised those families who had worked hard to secure a good household income.

***'You shouldn't assume that the government would automatically support you.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

***'If unemployment comes or you fall on hard times, the government should be there then.'***

Father, 35-55 years

***'I don't see why someone on a higher salary shouldn't get benefits.'***

Mother, 55+ years

Other government financial support such as Child Benefit is available to all parents regardless of income. Although more than two in five (43%) people agree with this, three in ten people think that Child Benefit should only be paid to lower income families (30%), and just under a quarter (23%) think that it should only be paid to families with children under the age of 16 years.<sup>84</sup> Significantly more parents (28%) than non parents (21%) felt that

<sup>84</sup> Ipsos MORI omnibus of 2000 people, fieldwork took place between 9th and 15th January 2009.

Child Benefit should be paid to all families with children under 16 years. This was also the opinion of those earning below £11,499 (27%) compared with 23% of those earning more than £25,000.

### **Ensuring the right support**

Generally, the public are willing to pay their tax to ensure that provision is available for those with greater needs. However, the public are concerned that firstly they are not always sure that the support goes to those who need it most, and secondly that it is used for the intended purpose. The public would like reassurance that support is only given to those who need it and are eligible, and would like to see a strict policing of benefit claimants.

***‘Should police it a bit better, checking up on people.***

***If you’ve got nothing to hide...’***

Mother, 35-55 years

Once the public are sure support is going to those who need it, they also want to ensure that the support is being used for that which it is intended, and not frivolously spent by the parents.

***‘Depends on how the family uses it. It should be used for the children not the parents. I prefer to see tokens.’***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

Although the public agree with the principle of providing government support to those who need it, and like the idea of providing tokens to be exchanged for goods and services, they also feel this has the potential to stigmatise those who receive support. The example of free school meals was discussed, as although it provides some children with the only ‘proper’ meal they may receive, it was felt to be unfair to single out the children who receive them.

***‘Why should children be stigmatised because of their parents?’***

***They have to line up separately for meals.’***

Mother, 55+ years

***‘If you’re a kid, you’ve got other kids standing around waiting for a chance to bully you, it’s not easy. There are some adults like that as well.’***

Father, 55+ years

Some members of the public feel that providing families with tokens for food such as milk and vegetables also means that they have to ‘declare’ their financial status to society when undertaking their food shopping, however other people felt that this was a small issue, and receiving the support was more important.

***‘They should just be grateful.’***

Mother, 35-55 years

***‘Shouldn’t parents be grateful for something free instead of worrying about a queue?’***

Mother, 35-55 years

***‘I had milk tokens and didn’t feel embarrassed. I felt glad to have some help.’***

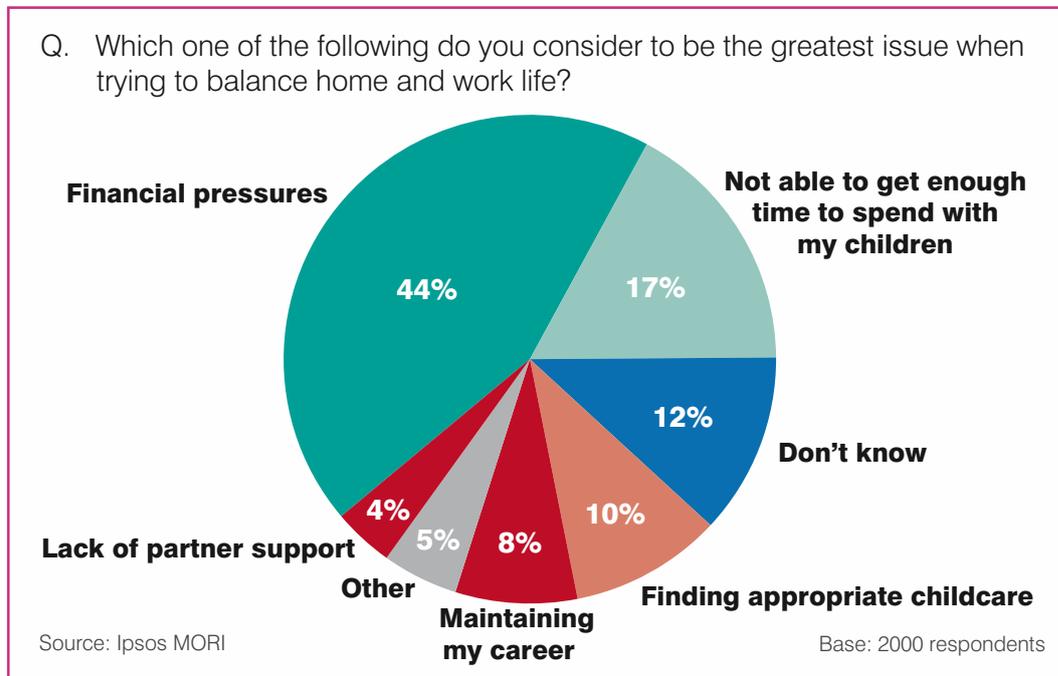
Mother, 55+ years

Once again this division of public opinion on the most appropriate way to provide financial support to families leaves any government with little steer on definitive action to meet parents’ needs.

### Supporting parents with maintaining a work-life balance

In the last years, a quarter of British adults aged 30-59 have downshifted (i.e. have moved from a financially rewarding but stressful career to a less well paid one with more free time) and almost all of them (90%) say they are happy with their decision. The most common reason for downshifting was to allow them to spend more time with their family.<sup>85</sup> Balancing home and work is something that continues to be a daily dilemma for parents, particularly in the current economic climate. It therefore comes as no surprise that financial pressures is one of the greatest issues for people trying to balance home and work.

### Chart 3.5 The greatest issue when balancing home and work life



Despite the introduction of the right to request flexible working for parents with children under five years in 2003, almost one in five parents feel that their employment does not allow them enough time to spend with their children. As of April 2009, this has been

<sup>85</sup> Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.44.

extended to all parents with children under 16 years. Full-time employees in Britain work the longest hours in Europe. Moreover, **working hours** are increasing and there are signs that many people are feeling the pressure. In 2008, 80,000 more people were working more than 48 hours a week compared to 2007.<sup>86</sup> Half of parents working full-time felt that they have insufficient quality time with their children and nine in ten parents said this was because of work demands,<sup>87</sup> and 8% of people indicated that maintaining their career was the greatest issue in trying to balance home and work life. This is likely to increase as the economic downturn takes effect. Four in five parents agreed that 'if money wasn't an issue, it would be better for one parent to stay at home and look after the children at least some of the time, rather than both working full-time'.<sup>88</sup>

**Flexible working** is a key part of this picture. Evidence suggests that family plays an important role in requesting flexible working: having free time in general (34%) and having more time to spend with family (33%) were the two most commonly cited positive consequences by individuals who had taken up one or more flexible working arrangements.<sup>89</sup> However, there are also associated negative impacts of flexible working. A recent report found that a fifth of employees who said that their career prospects were poor, attributed this to the fact that they were working flexibly or part time (34% of women and only 7% of men).<sup>90</sup> Moreover, workers on low pay are least likely to access work-life balance policies. As the economy changes, and moves into a recession, it may become harder for companies to offer flexible working options. The government recently announced its decision to halt plans to extend the right to request flexible working from those with children under 6 years to all parents with children under 16 years in an attempt to help businesses during this economic downturn.

Attitudes towards **maternity and paternity leave** are also an area which has illustrated differences between the genders. Attitudes towards paternity leave are very positive: four in five men approve of laws which give fathers up to twelve weeks' unpaid paternity leave. Support was particularly strong among young men, with nine in ten aged 20-29 years backing paternity leave, and that women overwhelmingly want men to spend more time with the family following the birth of a child.<sup>91</sup> Some 85% of people see these as the key factors in support of paternity leave and a further 5% see the leave as a means of helping the mother return to work.<sup>92</sup> However, less than two in five (37%) fathers took their full two weeks' paternity leave. Reasons for this included that fathers felt their careers would suffer if they took too much time off work; they did not feel that their employer was family friendly; or that urgent work demanded their time.<sup>93</sup>

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86 Office of National Statistics (2008) Labour Force Survey.

87 Department of Children, Schools and Families (2008) National Survey of Parents and Children - Family Life, Aspirations and Engagement with Learning, p165-166.

88 Department of Children, Schools and Families (2008) National Survey of Parents and Children - Family Life, Aspirations and Engagement with Learning, p158.

89 Hooker, H., Neathy, F., Casebourne, J. and Munro, M., (2007) 'Third Work Life Balance Survey of Employees', London: Department for Trade and Industry.

90 Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) 'Enter the Timelords: Transforming Work to Meet the Future' London: EOC.

91 Ipsos MORI (2000) 'Men Support Blair's Paternity Leave' Ipsos MORI interviewed 503 men in full time work, aged 20-50, across Britain between 23-28 May 2000.

92 Ipsos MORI (2000) 'Men Support Blair's Paternity Leave', Ipsos MORI interviewed 503 men in full time work, aged 20-50, across Britain between 23-28 May 2000.

93 A YouGov/ ING poll of 2006 cited in The Guardian on 1st August 2006, 'Fathers fail to make full use of paternity leave'.

**Childcare** is also crucial as it can often be one of the main factors in determining if, and where, a parent is able to enter into employment. As illustrated in chart 3.5 one in ten people indicated that finding appropriate childcare is one of the greatest issues in balancing home and work. Two in five people would support 'subsidising the cost of services such as childcare' as the best way of helping parents with the cost of children, and just over one third (36%) thought it was a better method than providing additional financial support.<sup>94</sup> The public expressed the importance of women being given the option to use childcare and return to work if they choose. When considering the use of formal childcare, the public are able to see the bigger picture and understand the wider impact of access to affordable childcare.

***'Free nursery places can help you go back to work and come off benefits.'***

Father, 35-55 years

A survey of 400 first-time mothers asked what their ideal choice for the family division of labour would be at their child's third birthday. Just 1% chose 'both parents work full-time and use childcare' (and just 6% of mothers already in full-time work). The rest were relatively evenly split between both parents working part-time and sharing childcare; the father working full-time, the mother part-time and using childcare; and the mother caring for the child full-time.<sup>95</sup>

### **What do people think about families and criminal behaviour?**

Antisocial behaviour, and its association with children, has been a powerful political issue in recent years.<sup>96</sup> The public do feel strongly that parents should take more responsibility for the behaviour of their children: as many as two in three parents think that this is important,<sup>97</sup> and one in five Londoners felt that encouraging more parental responsibility would improve safety in their area.<sup>98</sup> There is a strong sense, however, that, despite media coverage, the public do not automatically link antisocial behaviour with particular kinds of family forms: just over half (56%) of people disagree that 'children brought up by a single parent are more likely to get into trouble than children brought up by married parents' while only two in five agree.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, there may be a mismatch between reality and perceptions. The children's charity Barnardo's found that 'the British public overestimates, by a factor of four, the amount of crime committed by young people'.<sup>100</sup>

94 Ipsos MORI omnibus of 2000 people, fieldwork took place between 9th and 15th January 2009.

95 Hakim, C., Bradley, K., Price, E. and Mitchell, L. (2008), 'Little Britons: Financing Childcare Choice', Policy Exchange, p26.

96 Home Office 'Anti-social behaviour', accessed at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/anti-social-behaviour>

97 Ipsos MORI Real Trends, 2,019 British adults 15+, 19th May – 5th June 2008, self-completion and online.

98 Annual London Survey (2005) Final results are based on 1,442 interviews conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes with a sample of residents in the Greater London area. Interviews were conducted between 20th October and 16th December 2005.

99 Populus interviewed a random sample of 1013 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 11th July 2007 and 12th July 2007. Interviews were conducted across England and the results have been weighted to be representative of all English adults. Accessed at [www.populuslimited.com/the-daily-politics-marriage-120707.html](http://www.populuslimited.com/the-daily-politics-marriage-120707.html)

100 Barnardo's(2008) accessed at [www.barnardos.org.uk/news\\_and\\_events/media\\_centre/press\\_releases.htm?ref=42088](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news_and_events/media_centre/press_releases.htm?ref=42088).



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04

What can government  
do to help families?

**Government has moved away from financial support that previously incentivised marriage towards a more universal provision for families. Legislative changes have given families more flexibility to maintain their home and work lives and have a degree of choice in their options. In moving forward, the public would like to see support made available to families but demonstrates a preference for this to be delivered to the service provider (e.g. nurseries) through subsidies, or in tax breaks for parents rather than providing additional cash. This ensures support is spent on what it is intended for, something deemed important by the public.**

### **Introduction**

Families can be complex, and ensuring the right balance between home and work is a careful negotiation. Parents need the right support to give them the freedom to raise their family, whilst accessing support when they need it.

Even though many of the public may not realise it, the government plays an important role in the domestic sphere. Policy is a key driver of the circumstances faced by families, and government can help families by affecting their civil rights through legislation; their health through services; their finances through tax and benefits; and their balance of work and care through a mixture of tax, benefits and services. However, families are often not aware of all the support available to them. The provision of accessible, quality information, advice and guidance is therefore crucial to ensuring that the public, especially families, are aware of the support available to them at key times of need.

This chapter considers when government should intervene in the family sphere and if so, what they can do to help families.

### **Should government interfere with families?**

Family is a personal sphere, and, some members of the public feel strongly that it is not the role of government to raise children, but that of individuals.<sup>101</sup>

***‘Government interferes too much and dictates to families what they should do – their lifestyle, what you should eat.’***

Father, 55+ years

***‘We don’t need unwanted advice from government and thinktanks...we know all that stuff...they’ll be telling us how to brush our teeth next.’***

Father, 35-55 years

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<sup>101</sup> Ipsos MORI deliberative workshop, February 9th 2009.

***'Back off and let parents do parenting and schools do schooling... we're here to look after our kids, they should know when to leave enough alone.'***

Father, 55+ years

The public are not always aware of the role of government, often seeing services as being provided by their employers or childcare providers. However, there is an increasing consensus that government has a role in ensuring fairness amongst all groups in society, particularly those that are most vulnerable.

We have seen that the shift towards non-traditional family forms can lead to poor outcomes for families regarding health, wellbeing and poverty. **Should government therefore be considering incentivising marriage?** This could be done through the use of tax breaks or reinstating 'Married Man's Allowance', which allowed the working partner to use the tax allowance of the non-working spouse. Some data suggests that people would prefer a greater focus on incentivising marriage, but the extent of the support seems quite sensitive to the specific question asked. For example,

- Populus found that half of people (51%) agreed 'married couples should be given breaks to reward and encourage commitment' (45% disagreed).<sup>102</sup>
- ICM found that just over half of people (57%) thought it is 'right for the government to encourage marriage' (with 35% disagreeing).<sup>103</sup>
- YouGov found that four in five people (80%) agreed that 'extra support for marriage should be given in the tax and benefits system'.<sup>104</sup>

The dilemma for policy makers is that there are limited government resources so increased support for two parent married families may mean less support for other groups. This is a powerful example of the tensions in interests between different types of families.

### What can government do about poverty in the family?

In recent years the amount of money spent by government to support families has increased significantly, but it has also been dramatically re-targeted, which has the effect of shifting support from one type of family form to others. Up until 1999 the three key family benefits were:

- Child Benefit (which began in 1975);
- Family Credit for low-income working families; and
- 'Married Man's Allowance' (it became the Married Couples' Allowance in 1990).<sup>105</sup>

This structure had numerous problems, for example, the Family Credit could lead to a 'poverty trap' as families increasing their earnings through work could lose almost as much in benefits. It did, however, focus benefits on those in work and it incentivised marriage

<sup>102</sup> Populus interviewed a random sample of 1013 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 11th July 2007 and 12th July 2007. Interviews were conducted across England and the results have been weighted to be representative of all English adults. Accessed at [www.populuslimited.com/the-daily-politics-marriage-120707.html](http://www.populuslimited.com/the-daily-politics-marriage-120707.html)

<sup>103</sup> ICM opinion poll July 2007 on behalf of the Sunday Telegraph.

<sup>104</sup> Social Justice Policy Group (2007) 'Breakthrough Britain' London: Centre for Social Justice, p. 17.

<sup>105</sup> If both parents worked the principal earner received an allowance enhanced by 50% Widows and single parents with dependant children received the full joint allowance.

rather than cohabitation (though single parents had the same allowance, assuming they worked, as a married couple). These benefits were restructured by the current Government in 1999 into, initially, a Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and a Children's Tax Credit, and then in 2003 a Working Tax Credit (WTC) and a Child Tax Credit (CTC). The WTC is no longer a family benefit as it is available to all those in employment with a low income including single people with no dependants. However, couples and single parents do get additional credit and there is a childcare element for those that have children.

This structure has a very different set of issues. By moving from a system based on tax allowances to one based on payments the government has created a system whereby almost all families are taxed on the one hand and then some receive back payments that equate to a similar level in benefits. There is no longer an incentive through the tax system to get married as a single parent or cohabiting couple are now entitled to the same level of support which is means tested on household income. **The focus on work rather than family has helped parents move out of poverty:** seven in ten single parent and couple families had moved out of poverty a year after transition into work.<sup>106</sup> **Although beneficial to the economy, people may question what impact this has had on the family and society.**

Also, some think the current system creates a 'couple penalty', arguing that individual assessment of income taxation combined with joint assessment of benefit entitlements with penalties for marriage or stable cohabitation means a double tax and benefit penalty for married couples.<sup>107</sup>

### What can government do about the balance of work and care in families?

The changes to family dynamics have had a profound effect on parents' requirements of the welfare state, childcare and early years provision, and conditions of employment. Britain has had a national scheme of government-funded paid maternity leave for 30 years. Since 1994, it has been progressively expanded to increase women's participation and retention in the labour market and to support working parents. Statutory maternity leave and pay was extended in 2003 and 2007 and is now amongst the longest in Europe.<sup>108</sup> Since 2003, fathers have been able to take two weeks statutory paternity leave and an increasing number take additional time off – more than a third (36%) in 2005 up from just one in five (22%) in 2002.<sup>109</sup>

The availability and take-up of flexible working is on the rise. 95% of employers offer at least one of the six main flexible working arrangements to employees; an increase from 88% in 2003. Take-up of these arrangements is also on the increase: nine in ten employers reported that these arrangements had been used by employees, up from eight in ten in 2003.<sup>110</sup>

106 Barnes, M., Lyon, N., Millar, J. (2008) 'Employment transitions and the changes in economic circumstances of families with children: Evidence from the Families and Children Study (FACS)', London: Department of Work and Pensions.

107 Kirby, J. (2008) 'The Price of Parenthood', London: Centre for Policy Studies.

108 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.55.

109 Cabinet Office/ The Strategy Unit (2008) 'Families in Britain: An Evidence Paper' Department for Children, Schools and Families, p.54.

110 Part-time working – 92% versus 81% in 2003; Reduced hours working for a limited period 74% vs. 40% in 2003; Compressed hours working 41% versus 19% in 2003; Job sharing 59% versus 39% in 2003; Flexitime 59% versus 38% in 2003; Working from home 26% versus 22% in 2003. See Hooker, H., Neathy, F., Casebourn, J., Munro, M., (2007) 'Third Work Life Balance Survey

From April 2009, the right to request flexible working is available to parents with children up to 16 years old.

A quarter of requests regarding working arrangements are to change the number of days, and which days of the week are worked, and for a reduction in the number of hours.<sup>111</sup>

Unsurprisingly, **women and men use the right to request flexible working in different ways**. Female employees who request a change to their working time are more likely to request part-time work than any other arrangement (30% compared to 18% of men).<sup>112</sup> Flexitime is the most popular request for men. Women are also more likely to have their requests accepted than men: two thirds (66%) of women had a request accepted, compared to just over half (54%) of men.<sup>113</sup> These trends reinforce Britain's broader pattern of women working part-time hours, and may be a result of other constraints rather than a desire to be spending more time on care, such as the availability of childcare, and the fear that career prospects may be damaged.

There is also an increasingly high take-up of formal and informal childcare as more parents spend time at work. Four in five families have used some form of childcare or early years provision in the last year.<sup>114</sup> The take-up of early years education is almost universal among four-year-olds, currently standing at 97%, and very high among three-year-olds, at 90%.<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, some barriers still exist as 12.5 hours of free childcare per week is usually not enough to enable parents to go out to work.

The deterrent of high costs of childcare means that the higher the household income, the higher the take-up of both formal and informal care due to the need for childcare to allow both parents to work. Half of families (52%) with an annual income of £45,000 or more have used formal childcare, compared with one third of families with a yearly income below £10,000.<sup>116</sup> Families are more likely to use informal childcare (65%) than formal provision (54%), and among the formal providers used in the last year, families reported using a breakfast or after school club (17%) reflecting the need to cover hours in the working day.<sup>117</sup> These figures indicate that a 'patchworking' of care is common, with parents using a mixture of formal and informal provision to suit their other commitments. Parents spoke of how important relatives are for support with childcare, allowing them to consider employment knowing that support was available should they need it particularly if the child is ill or during school holidays.

Chart 4.1 illustrates that just over one third of people think that the **government should subsidise the cost of services** such as childcare as a way to support parents with the cost of raising children, and just under one third would reduce the amount of tax parents pay.

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of Employees', London: Department for Trade and Industry.

111 Hooker, H., Neathey, F., Casebourne, J. and Munro, M. (2007) 'The Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey: Main Findings' Employment Relations Research Series No. 58. London: Department for Trade and Industry.

112 Holt, H. and Granger, H. (2005) 'Results of the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey' London: Department for Trade and Industry.

113 Holt, H. and Granger, H. (2005) 'Results of the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey' London: Department for Trade and Industry.

114 Kazimirski, A., Smith, R., Butt, S., Ireland, E. and Lloyd, E. (2007) 'Childcare and Early Years Survey 2007: Parents' Use, Views and Experiences' London: Department for Children Schools and Families.

115 Lavalley, I. (2008) 'Have government policies helped hardworking families?' London: Family and Parenting Institute.

116 Lavalley, I. (2008) 'Have government policies helped hardworking families?' London: Family and Parenting Institute.

117 Lavalley, I. (2008) 'Have government policies helped hardworking families?' London: Family and Parenting Institute.

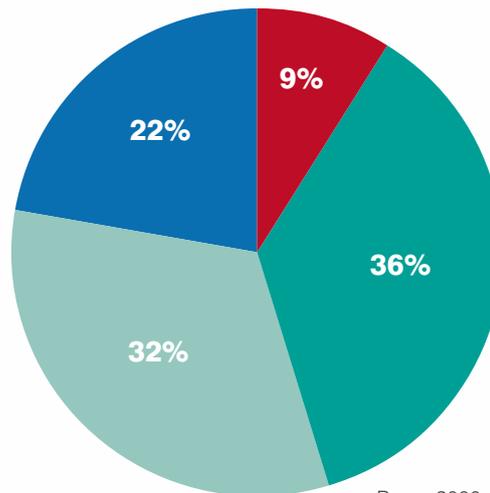
### Chart 4.1 The best way of helping families with the cost of raising children

Q. There are different ways in which support could be given to help parents with the cost of raising children. I am going to show you three options and I would like to know which of the following you:

Think is the best of the three in helping parents with the cost of raising children

#### Key

- **Subsidising the cost of services such as childcare**
- **Reducing the amount of tax parents have to pay**
- **Providing extra cash to help towards the cost of raising children**
- **Don't know**



Source: Ipsos MORI

Base: 2000 respondents

Only one in five people feel the government should provide parents with extra cash as the public are keen to ensure that any support provided is used for what it is intended, and giving extra cash does not necessarily do this.

***'It depends how the family uses the money. But it should be used for children rather than parents ... that's where tokens are better.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

The new structure of **the tax and benefits system has successfully encouraged more women with children into work**, partly by removing the Married Couples Allowance but also by insisting that the childcare element of the WTC (up to £300 a week) only be spent on approved formal childcare. Likewise the Early Years Entitlement which provides parents of 3-4 year olds with 12.5 hours per week of nursery care acts as a push towards formal care. Access to childcare is important for parents as the public believe mothers ought to have the choice whether to undertake paid employment or remain at home to care for their child full-time. It is felt that this choice should be dictated by the parents' preference on the child's development rather than lack of access to affordable childcare.

***'We should let women decide whether they want to work ... they shouldn't be pressurised by society; it's natural for many to want to look after their child.'***

Non parent, male, 35-55 years

Yet despite advocating parental choice, there is a clear preference for at least one parent to be able to stay at home with pre-school children. Four in five people agree it is 'better for pre-school children to be looked after by a parent at home rather than by a childminder or day nursery' and only three in ten agree 'we should be trying to encourage mothers to go back to work and contribute to the economy rather than making it easier to stay at home.'<sup>118</sup>

***'Lots of mums like to be stay-at-home mums, but they have to go out to work so they can afford the extras for kids. Then the kids get left alone at home and get up to all sorts of trouble.'***

Mother, 18-35 years

This would seem to suggest that people would support a shift from subsidised formal childcare to cash benefits that could be used to allow a parent to stay at home. Indeed three quarters of people agree that money should be available in the form of home care allowances so a parent could provide childcare.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Social Justice Policy Group (2007) Breakthrough Britain, London: Centre for Social Justice, p. 17, accessed at <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/family%20breakdown.pdf>.

<sup>119</sup> Social Justice Policy Group (2007) Breakthrough Britain, London: Centre for Social Justice, p. 17, accessed at <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/family%20breakdown.pdf>.



The background is a solid green color. Overlaid on this are several thick, white, geometric lines that form a series of sharp, angular shapes, resembling a stylized mountain range or a series of peaks and valleys. The lines are white and have a consistent thickness. The overall composition is minimalist and modern.

05

Should government make  
benefits conditional?

**While very concerned about ‘bad’ parenting, the public struggle to see how financial support for families can be made conditional, they accept that many parents have different opinions on the most appropriate way to raise a child, and that identifying ‘bad parenting’ is a very difficult task beyond the most obvious cases. The public feel it would be more appropriate to provide parents with the training they need to break the cycle of ‘poor’ parenting often passed through generations than to impose financial sanctions or penalties. However, despite people supporting parenting programmes for those who do not bring up their children ‘properly’, they cannot see how attendance at such provision would be enforceable. Any financial penalty or imprisonment would ultimately impact on the wellbeing of the child, something considered totally unacceptable by most people.**

### **Introduction**

Some evidence indicates that children growing up in new family structures demonstrate poorer outcomes in relation to educational achievement, health, poverty and participation in antisocial behaviour. This has raised the question of the degree to which parents are responsible for their child’s development, and whether the government has a role in intervening in families.

So far we have discussed the kind of assistance government could give families but there is a secondary question of whether this assistance could or should be conditional. Other payments, like unemployment benefits, are increasingly conditional on fulfilling certain conditions. Given the significant problems that bad parenting causes society, directly in terms of truancy, antisocial behaviour, crime and indirectly in poor health and education outcomes for children, should family payments be used to encourage good parenting? This chapter explores what is meant by bad parenting and whether government support for parents should be made conditional.

### **What is bad parenting?**

Despite indicating that families do not necessarily want further government intervention, the public do think **parents have a responsibility to raise their children properly** and provide them with the best start in life. When asked what constitutes ‘bad parenting’, the public feel that it is demonstrated by varying forms of neglect. In addition to extreme examples of physical and mental abuse, the public also described daily activities where parents have a role. For example, they feel bad parenting includes not paying an interest in, or offering support to, their child’s education, feeding children unhealthy processed foods, or allowing a lack of cleanliness or respect for adults. The public feel that a combination of these would lead to the child growing up with a poor attitude towards society and has the potential to lead to antisocial behaviour and poor outcomes. One of the biggest questions remains unsolved, **who decides what is bad parenting and how do you police it?**

***'It is very difficult to measure what's a good and bad parent... so it is difficult to have sanctions.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

### Should financial support to parents be conditional?

If bad parenting is believed to lead to poor outcomes, should financial support from the government to parents be made conditional on 'good behaviour'? Other countries have made family benefits conditional. In **Mexico** parents have to keep their children in school and take them for regular health checks, a measure which does seem to have boosted school attendance and child health outcomes.<sup>120</sup> In **Australia** maternity payments are conditional on having children vaccinated and pilots are currently ongoing in Aboriginal communities whereby family payments have been tied to a wide range of behaviours including school attendance and housing tenancy conditions.<sup>121</sup> A bill is currently working its way through the Australian parliament that would see child benefit cut to parents of children who truant from school.

Even more controversially since 1992, 24 **US** states have introduced so-called 'family caps' which mean that children conceived while their mothers are on welfare are not eligible for additional support.<sup>122</sup> The 'cap' is still operating in 22 states.<sup>123</sup> Rather than attempting to incentivise good behaviour these laws try to directly influence the fertility of families who are statistically more likely to be dysfunctional. The evidence on the effectiveness of these measures is, though, very mixed. Some research has found reductions in births and an increase in abortions to affected families while others find no effect at all.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, where children are born to mothers on welfare the effect of the 'family cap' must reduce the families living standards. Given the strong established relationship between poverty and negative outcomes it would be surprising if 'family caps' did not harm the children born into these families.

In **Britain**, the closest we have got to conditionality on family payments was when the government proposed removing Child Benefit from parents whose children were persistently truanting from school. This policy was eventually rejected after pressure from child poverty groups but fines were introduced instead which can range from £50 to £2,500 or three months in prison. There is little evidence that these actions have had much impact, despite 10,000 prosecutions in 2007, up 76% since 2000, as incidents of truancy have increased since 1997.<sup>125</sup>

In terms of public opinion there is certainly a belief that parents do not, on the whole, take enough responsibility for their children. Four in five people agree that 'young people today have too much freedom and not enough discipline'.<sup>126</sup> And nine in ten people agree

120 OECD (2006) *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life* Vol.4, Geneva: OECD, p76.

121 Saunders, P. (2008) 'From Entitlement to Employment' in Lawrence Kay and Oliver Hartwich (eds). *When hassle means help*, London: Policy Exchange.

122 Center for Law and Social Policy (2003), *Lifting the Lid on the Family Cap*, Brief No. 1, Boston: Center for Law and Social Policy.

123 National Conference of State Legislatures website, accessed at [www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/familycap05.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/familycap05.htm)

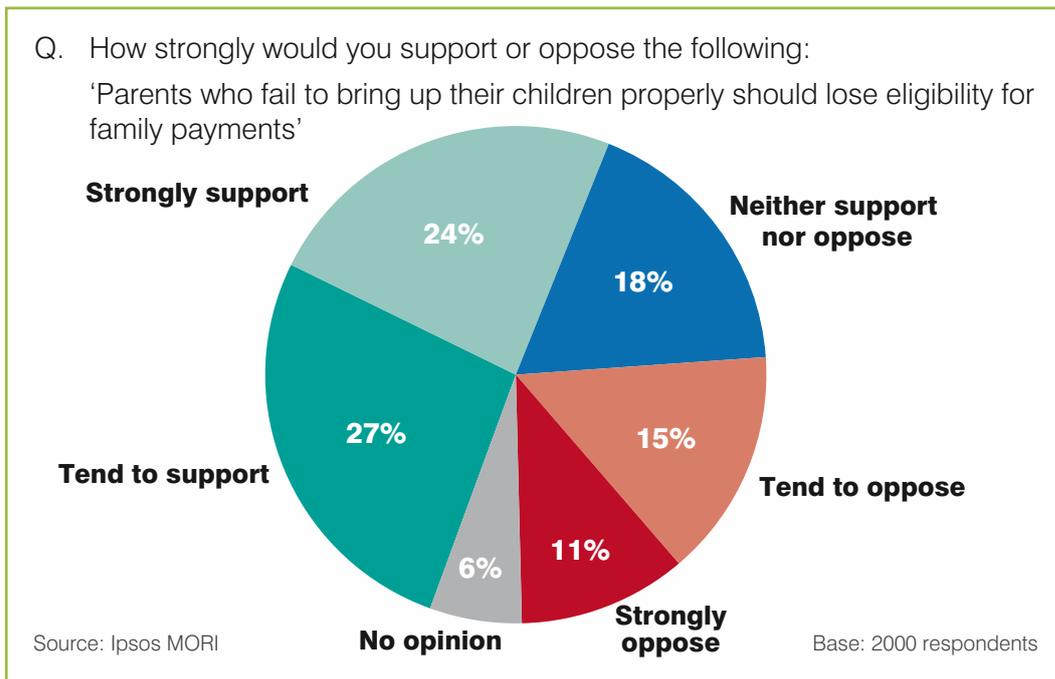
124 For a comprehensive list of studies see Anne E Horvath-Rose et al. (2008), *Capping Kids: The Family Cap and Nonmarital Childbearing*, *Population Policy Review* 27, pp. 122-123.

125 Ipsos MORI poll (2008) 'Truancy jailing every two weeks', BBC website, accessible at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7868061.stm>

126 Ipsos MORI poll (2008) 'Truancy jailing every two weeks', BBC website, accessible at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7868061.stm>

that **‘parents should be made to take more responsibility for the behaviour of their children’**.<sup>127</sup> We found that anxiety around parenting did translate into support for introducing benefits conditionality. Half of people said they would support reduced eligibility for ‘parents who fail to bring up their children properly’ with a quarter opposing such a policy.<sup>128</sup> Interestingly, this rises to more than half (54%) of parents supporting conditionality compared with less than half (49%) of non parents, but the figures are fairly evenly divided.

**Chart 5.1 Should parents who fail to bring up their children properly lose eligibility for family payments?**



People feel that this type of policy would have a high impact on the lower social classes who *‘would come under the searchlight’*. However, interestingly, significantly more respondents in higher social grades (AB-14% and C1-13%) strongly opposed this statement compared with lower social grades (C2 and DE both 8%) while significantly more unemployed people also strongly opposed this statement (21%) compared to people who were employed full (10%) or part-time (11%).

Given more time to reflect, the public began to increase their appreciation of the complexity of the problem and the lack of clear solutions. This suggests that, if given more time to think about the impact of such action, more of the public would also question such strong action.

***‘Sanctions make a problem [such as antisocial behaviour] worse.’***

Mother, 55+ years

***‘None of us could think of a sanction which wouldn’t ultimately affect the child ... it would be a vicious circle.’***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

127 Ipsos MORI Real Trends, self-completion and online. Base: 2,019 British adults 16+, 9th May – 5th June 2008.

128 Ipsos MORI omnibus of 2000 people, fieldwork took place between 9th and 15th January 2009.

An alternative strategy which the government has made increasing use of in recent years is to intervene directly with **Parenting Orders and family interventions** to try to reduce the number of seriously dysfunctional families. Parenting Orders can be imposed by magistrate courts if a child is between 10-17 years and has been convicted of an offence, is subject to an ASBO or has been playing truant. Schools, local authorities, youth offending teams and social landlords can also apply for orders. Typically the order specifies attendance at a parenting programme which can last up to three months. Non-compliance can lead to a £1,000 fine, but does not affect family benefits.<sup>129</sup> Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) are much more intensive programmes to tackle highly problematic families. They provide a single key worker to 'grip' the family and challenge the root causes of their behaviour by giving individual support. At the most intensive level families who require supervision and support on a 24-hour basis stay in a residential unit. The cost of each intervention ranges from around £5,000 per family to as much as £36,500.<sup>130</sup>

These programmes have had some success. For more than 85% of families involved in FIPs, complaints about anti-social behaviour ceased or reduced and in more than nine in ten (92%) cases the risk to local communities was assessed as having either reduced or ceased completely.<sup>131</sup> Parenting programmes have also shown positive outcomes. But the problem is that these interventions are expensive and are used on a very small number of families. Just 1,500 are involved in FIPs and just 1,507 parenting orders were handed out in 2006/7.<sup>132</sup> It may be that instigating more widespread smaller scale interventions, like regular visits from health visitors, that can act as a gateway to health, childcare and welfare services could be a way to combine the need for assistance reviewed in the last chapter with the need to act on families at risk of dysfunction.

The public really struggled to comprehend how the government would be able to decide what is 'proper parenting'. If 'bad parents' could be identified the public felt it would be preferable to offer them support and education through parenting programmes rather than imposing sanctions or fines to prevent bad parenting being passed from generation to generation.

***'It's more of a positive approach, rather than sanctions and fines.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

***'Whatever happens...it's all about addressing the problem.'***

Father, 55+ years

***'Is a parent being a bad parent if they don't know any better? It is important to separate ignorance from direct neglect.'***

Mother, 55+ years

The public like the idea of a **contract between the parent and the state**, and if the contract was broken, an educational route would be preferable to financial sanctions. Ipsos MORI found that encouraging 'good' behaviour from 'problem' parents to support

129 Home Office website, 'Parenting Orders', accessed at <http://www.respect.gov.uk/members/article.aspx?id=7780>

130 Home Office website, 'Innovative help to tackle neighbours from hell', accessed at <http://www.respect.gov.uk/news/article.aspx?id=10318>

131 Nixon, J., Hunter, C., and Parr, S. (2006) 'Anti-social Behaviour Intensive Family Support Projects: An evaluation of six pioneering projects'. Communities and Local Government.

132 Youth Justice Board (2006/7), Youth Justice Annual Workload Data, London: Youth Justice Board, accessed at <http://www.yjb.gov.uk/Publications/Scripts/prodView.asp?idproduct=376&eP>, p. 28.

them raising their children, for example through the provision of parenting classes, was most likely to be suggested as the best approach by the general public.<sup>133</sup> However, it was felt that this would not be enforceable without impacting on the child. If parents did not want intervention, then they were unlikely to voluntarily access parenting programmes. Participants felt that the only way in which parents could be sanctioned would be through financial penalty or imprisonment, both of which would ultimately impact on the wellbeing of children, which is widely considered a 'moral absolute' regardless of the behaviour of their parents.

***'Taking a benefit away is saying you're not managing and so we'll make it tougher for you.'***

Father, 55+ years

***'There are different views on how to raise children...none of us can think of a sanction which wouldn't ultimately affect the child...it is always going to feed back to the child...it's a vicious circle.'***

Non parent, female, 18-35 years

***'How can you put a monetary value to parenting?'***

Father 55+ years

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133 Public Services Policy Review (March 2007) for HM Government, Ipsos MORI. Base: 54 forum participants, 3rd March 2007.







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