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The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004:

Parenting under the microscope



A report commissioned by Lever Fabergé, a Unilever company, and researched and written by Laura Edwards on behalf of ippr trading ltd, focusing on the challenges and support needs of today's parents.

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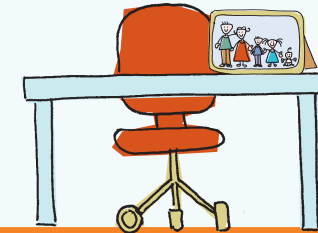
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Foreword

by Keith Weed, Chairman, Lever Fabergé Ltd



As a father of three children I have more than a professional interest in The Lever Fabergé Family Report. With my eldest reaching the age of 13, this year's research comes at a particularly pertinent time for my own family!

The report reveals that as the challenges facing parents rise in the teenage years, for many of them, the levels of support actually fall. This is defined in the report as the parental 'see-saw' and shows that the consequence for many parents is isolation, anxiety and silence.

Most parents of teenagers feel unable to share the challenges they face with other parents and there appears to be a major gap in institutional support. All this at a time when society is putting parents and parenting under the microscope. These are significant findings for all who care about the family.

Understanding the challenges and joys of families is the bedrock of our business. Brands such as Persil, Dove, Domestos and Lynx are present in nine out of ten homes and with 2.5 million supermarket transactions every day we are in constant contact with the British family. In addition, with over 2000 employees in the UK there will also be many people in Lever Fabergé for whom family matters are a daily issue.

At Lever Fabergé we place enormous value on endeavouring to understand people in their totality - not simply as purchasers of our products. As a consequence, and through the Lever Fabergé Family Report, we are able to contribute to the public and policy debate on the family.

Last year the Family Report research examined the relationship between happiness and children. It created new understanding as to why people are delaying parenthood and debunked the myth that women without children become desperate for children as they get older.

In particular, the research showed why women are choosing to have children later and consequently, why families are getting smaller. The feeling amongst women of a "mother tax" whereby income, career and lifestyle are all impacted by children was especially important.

In 2002, the study examined the prospect of Lifelong Parenting, heralding the arrival of the 'Boomerang Kid', where 20-something children - particularly boys - are living at home for longer and returning to the nest more often.

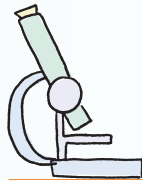
The insights that continue to be uncovered in the Lever Fabergé Family Reports inform the future of our brands, help our customers - the retailers - to better meet the needs of people and contribute to the development of our own parent-friendly employment practices.

Furthermore, the research supports the work of hundreds of our employees who volunteer for a range of activities to help children and families. They include the support of the East Leeds Family Learning Centre, the reading and numbers schemes where our people go into local schools to support literacy and numeracy drives and the numerous family-based projects that take place around our sites and factories.

Within the following pages, there is much for policy makers, business, family-focused organisations and ordinary individuals to think about. At Lever Fabergé we are proud to make a contribution to a debate of such importance.



Summary



Parenting is under the microscope.

How well children do at school, whether they get involved in anti-social behaviour and how healthy they are, for example, are all seen to be dependent on the ability of their parents to 'do a good job'. Parents clearly have a responsibility for their children's behaviour; they also have a right to live in a society which creates a supportive environment in which to raise children. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004 explores how parents talk and think about parenting and focuses on how support for parents, particularly those with teenagers, can be improved.

The report also focuses on parental well-being. It builds on the Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003¹ which sought to understand the link between children and happiness. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004 looks at how satisfied parents are and what impinges on their well-being.

Promoting the well-being of parents is valid not only because it is likely to lead to positive outcomes for children but because it impacts on how able parents are to function in society as a whole, in their families, in the work place and in their own communities.

The report is based on original quantitative and qualitative research as well as a literature review. A survey of over a thousand parents was conducted. All of the parents surveyed had at least one teenager living at home, many also had younger children. Case study interviews were also conducted with six different families. Key findings are highlighted below and discussed in greater depth in the body of the report.

Parenting anxiety

The research highlights a tension between the positive and negative sides of parenting and points to a gap in support for parents of teenagers. **Nine in ten parents report being *satisfied with their lives, of these, four in ten reports being 'very satisfied'***. Being a parent is judged to have mainly positive impacts on other things in life, including relationships, motivation and productivity at work, general health, mood and stress levels. This is not the whole story, however. Being a parent, according to parents themselves, has mainly negative impacts on their sleep, energy level and their sex life, for example. We also know from the Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 that having children can put a strain on relationships, finances and careers.

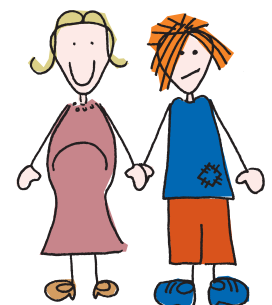
It is also clear that parents today think they have a harder task than their own parents. **Sixty one per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers think that they have a more difficult job than their own mother and father.** Each generation of parents may always judge its job to be more difficult than that of the previous generation. However, the high percentage (over 60 per cent) of lone parents and parents living with stepchildren who believe that they have a more difficult job than their own parents, suggests that the more diverse family structures that exist today present new and complex challenges.

There is a strong link between parenting styles, the quality of parent-child relationships and child well-being. Authoritative parenting, which combines warmth, responsiveness and high expectations, is seen as the optimum parenting style and most likely to lead to child well-being. However, the difficulty of the parenting task is reflected in the level of self-doubt felt by parents. The majority of both mothers and fathers are critical of the job they do as parents and worry that they don't always get it right.

Over half of parents with teenagers sometimes worry that they do not do a good enough job as a parent.

Mothers and lone parents, who are predominantly women, are most likely to worry. **Sixty three per cent of mothers sometimes worry about whether they're doing a good enough job**, reflecting the more involved role that many women play in care-giving. The finding also suggests that mothers, although active participants in the workplace, may judge themselves as much (if not more) on the job they do in the home. Fathers are not far behind, however. **Fifty one per cent of fathers sometimes worry that they do not do a good enough job.** As expectations of fathers to play a more active and hands-on role in bringing up children increase, fathers may become as critical of the job they do as fathers as mothers are of the job they do as mothers.

continued over



Summary

continued

² See for example Gordon 2003



Testing teens

When asked what age in their child's development they have found most difficult there is overwhelming agreement among parents that the teenage years are most testing. **Three quarters of parents with teenagers think that between the ages of thirteen and eighteen are the hardest years.**

This is not surprising. The teen years are a time of considerable change. There is particular emphasis on the early teenage years between 13 and 15 being the most difficult, pointing to the crucial transition that these ages represent. Children are pushing for greater autonomy and independence; challenging parental authority and spending more time away from the home. **Parents have been parents for 13 years or more by this point but the transition to the teen years may make them feel that they are starting from scratch.**

That the teenage years are testing is not surprising. What is surprising is the gap between how difficult parents find their job at this time and how well supported they feel. There is a see-saw effect.

The number of difficult dilemmas that parents face is likely to go up as their children hit their teenage years, but parents' perception of the support they receive from society goes down. Rather than feeling supported they are more likely to feel isolated. **Seventy-four per cent of parents think that society is more supportive of parents with younger children than it is of parents with teenagers.**

Parenting in silence

Parents with teenagers appear to parent in silence, reluctant to speak out when things go wrong for fear that they may be branded a failure. They do not always know what to do when presented with difficult dilemmas but are likely to face them on their own. One in five parents with teenagers, for example, finds it difficult to discipline their children and more than one in ten finds it difficult to keep their children away from drink and drugs. However, **53 per cent of parents wish it were easier to talk to other fathers and mothers with teenage children about the challenges of being a parent.** This represents over 1.5 million mothers and fathers with teenage children in real terms. The figure rises to 60 per cent of those on lower incomes and 70 per cent of those living with stepchildren.

The struggling few

While the teenage years can be a difficult time for most parents they are genuinely challenging for a minority who really struggle. **One in seventeen parents with teenagers are unsatisfied with their lives.** These parents are more likely to be lone parents, young parents (those under 35 with teenage children), those not working and parents from minority ethnic groups. Parents who are unsatisfied consistently score significantly higher on a range of negative factors than other parents: 82 per cent worry that they're not doing a good enough job; 64 per cent think that being a parent has a mainly negative impact on their energy levels; 61 per cent find it difficult to spend as much time with their children as they would like; 58 per cent find it difficult to discipline their children and over half think that being a parent has a mainly negative impact on their general health. For this group – the 'struggling few' – there is a clear sense of anxiety and doubt in their ability to do a good enough job. **While a minority overall, when mapped on to the total population more than 200,000 parents with teenagers as well as younger children could fall into this category.** These parents need support and encouragement to boost their confidence, skills and know-how.

Money matters

Part of the struggle of bringing up teenagers, for all parents and not just a minority, concerns money. The costs of bringing up children can be high. **Four in ten parents find it difficult to buy the things that their children want**, this rises to six in ten lone parents and parents on low incomes. Five in ten parents put 'more money' top of the list of things that would most improve their life as a parent. There are two stories behind the figures. The first concerns the fact that the level of spending on children expected and encouraged of today's parents is high. Even parents on higher incomes state that they have difficulty buying the things their children want. The second, more worrying story concerns the significant numbers of families that can't afford what their children *need*, let alone what their children *want*. The evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of families struggle to get by financially is compelling². Data shows that children are disproportionately present in low-income households. For a significant minority of parents, making ends meet is a priority.





Another challenge for parents with teenagers, as well as those with younger children, is balancing work and family life. It is not just in the early years and childhood that parents may want more flexibility in the hours they work and more time to spend with their children. Parents with teenagers want work-life balance too. **Forty one per cent of fathers and 35 per cent of mothers with teenage children state that they find it quite or very difficult to spend as much time with their children as they would like.**

Supporting parents

The research findings point to a number of changes that would boost support for parents, particularly those with teenagers. **More money is top of the parents' wish lists and this is clearly a priority for those on low incomes who struggle to make ends meet.** There is also a need to find ways to ensure that parents of teenagers feel more supported and less isolated. Policy makers, employers, and society at large need to recognise that the challenges of being a parent increase rather than decrease as children reach their teenage years. While it is normal for parents to discuss teething problems or the 'terrible twos', we leave parents to cope with the testing teens largely in silence.

For parents who feel isolated and unsure there is a need to boost support networks. Strengthening informal links between parents and helping them to share their skills and reflect on the challenges they face could play an important role in helping them through the difficult times. Part of the challenge is in developing a culture in which it is okay for parents with teenagers to admit that they don't always have the answers. **Parents should be encouraged and enabled to create support networks, in the workplace, in their communities and on the internet, for example.** These networks would give them the time and space to support each other and develop the parenting know-how and confidence that parent-toddler groups and informal gatherings at the school gates offer parents with younger children. Examples of good practice already exist but they need to be more widespread and better known.

Another conclusion to draw from our research is the **need for greater focus on parents with teenagers in work-life balance debates.** It is not just parents with younger children who would like more time to spend with their children but those with teenagers too. Part of the challenge for government and employers is to create an environment in which it is legitimate for parents of teenagers to ask for time off or flexible working hours in order to attend school events or simply spend time with their teenagers when they're going through difficulties. It may be that it is more acceptable for those with younger children to negotiate flexible arrangements on family grounds than it is for parents of teenagers to do so. Currently only parents with children under six have a right to ask their employer for flexible working arrangements.

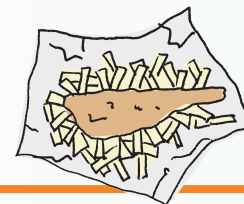


A final area where there is clear scope to boost support for parents of teenagers is in the provision of affordable and accessible activities and clubs for young people. There is a growing emphasis on supporting children and their parents in early childhood through the provision of activities and children's centres but this needs to be matched with a similar commitment to supporting parents with teenagers. **Forty five per cent of parents state that more activities and youth clubs for their children to attend is what would most improve their life as a parent.** The provision of affordable activities and places for teenagers to go would help parents give their teenagers the freedom to go out and develop their independence without worrying about their safety or whether they will get into trouble. Such activities and places for teenagers to 'hang-out' need to be developed with imagination. There are pockets of innovation, such as 'dry' pubs for teenagers and outdoor youth shelters where young people can spend time without being accused of troublemaking, for example. These innovations need to become more widespread in order to support teenagers as well as their parents.

Introduction

³Alstott 2004

⁴For full details of the polling and case study interviews see appendices



“In the not-so-distant past, child-rearing was an economic bargain as much as an emotional venture: children provided a small platoon of workers for the farm or factory and an economic hedge against illness, disability and old age. [...] Today, society expects parents to do the intensive work of preparing children for life – to supervise a lengthy period of education and to give priority to their children’s needs for nearly two decades. As a result, parenthood has become an extraordinarily demanding social role, requiring a complete restructuring of economic and personal lives”

Anne Alstott³

This study is about mothers, fathers and parenting. The importance of ‘good’ parenting in contributing to positive social outcomes is increasingly emphasised by government, policy makers and practitioners. Parents make a private decision to have children but when they do so they step into an increasingly public role. How well children do at school, whether they get involved in anti-social behaviour, how healthy they are and how they develop socially for example, are all seen to be dependent on the ability of their parents to ‘do a good job’. Parenting is under the microscope. How parents act as parents and what they do is increasingly the subject of public policy debates and scrutiny.

This study starts from the widely held premise that while parents clearly have responsibilities, they also have rights. Not least of these is a right to the necessary support that they need to do the ‘good job’ that society expects of them.

The report focuses on how support for parents, particularly those with teenagers, might be improved. If we expect parents to fulfil the myriad of responsibilities that we assign them – from feeding their children a healthy diet to getting involved in their children’s education to instilling in them civic values and standards of socially acceptable behaviour – are we doing enough to provide them with the tools, resources and support to do that job well?

The study is also interested in parental well-being. It builds on the Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 which sought to understand the link between children and happiness. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004 seeks to understand how satisfied parents are and what impinges on their well-being. It suggests that we should be interested in parents not only because we want the best possible outcomes for children (important though this is) but because promoting parental well-being is important in its own right. Failure to support parents can have negative impacts on the economy, on community life and on the quality of family life itself.

This report is based on original quantitative and qualitative research undertaken in April and May 2004. A survey of over 1,000 parents, including 500 mothers and 500 fathers, and a series of in-depth interviews with members of six different families was conducted⁴. While there is increasing public and political consensus about the need to support parents in the early years, we were keen to focus on how the job of parenting changes over time as children grow up. All of the parents in the survey had at least one teenager living at home, half also had younger children. We have set our findings in the context of existing evidence and analysis on families, parenting and well-being.

This report focuses on what families look like in Britain today and the diversity of family relationships. It explores how parents talk about the challenges of being a parent and how able they feel they are to meet the expectations placed on them. It recognises that parenting is not something that stays static but is a role which changes and must respond to new challenges as children get older. The report focuses on transition points for parents and looks at the ages in their child’s development that they find most difficult. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004 concludes by setting out thinking on areas where support for parents and their children could be boosted.



Section one: What do families look like in Britain today?

⁵ Social Trends No 34

⁶ Social Trends No. 33

⁷ Lewis 2000

⁸ Social Trends 34

Families today are more diverse in structure than they have ever been. The web of relationships between mothers, fathers, stepmothers, stepfathers, non-resident fathers, non-resident mothers and their children and stepchildren can be complicated. There is talk of the decline of the 'traditional' family unit of two parents and dependent children. But while there has been a shift over time and families today are more diverse in structure, the shape of families in Britain still tends to follow the mould of a couple with dependent children. The majority of children still live with both of their birth parents and in 'couple' households. In 2003, 77 per cent of children lived in couple families⁵. These couples are less likely to be married than they were in the past (although the majority still do marry) and are more likely to include stepmothers and stepfathers but the 'two adults and dependent children' model still dominates.

See *fig.1*

While the majority of children still live in couple households, it is important to highlight the increase in single parent households. In 1992, 15 per cent of children lived in lone parent households; in 2003 this figure had risen to 23 per cent. Single mothers head around 9 out of 10 lone parent families. This is not to say that fathers play no part in these families. One study suggests, for example, that 70 per cent of non-resident fathers still have contact with their children⁷. However, the day-to-day job of parenting in lone parent households is one that falls primarily on mothers. The increase in lone parent households can be attributed to a number of factors. In part, it is a result of the increase in the divorce rate over the last few decades, although this peaked in 1993 and has fallen and steadied since. It can also be attributed to the number of people having children outside of marriage.

In 1990, 28 per cent of births in the UK were outside of marriage; in 2003 this figure had risen to 41 per cent⁸.

Family structures vary across different ethnic groups. Asian families are significantly less likely to be lone parent families than all other ethnic groups. Only 11 per cent of Asian households are lone parent households. However, mixed ethnicity families are significantly more likely to be lone parent households. Forty three per cent of black families in the UK are lone parent families, and 39 per cent of mixed ethnicity families are lone parent families. This compares with 22 per cent of white families that are lone parent families.

See *fig.2*



fig.1 What do families look like in Britain today?

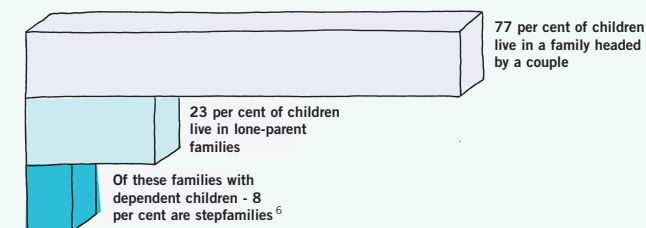
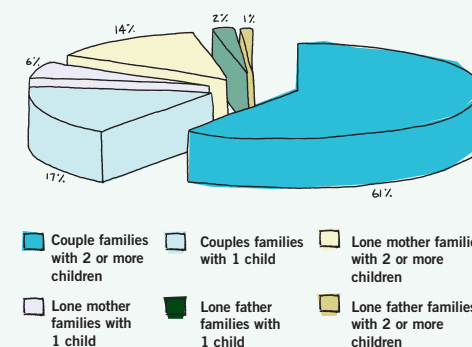
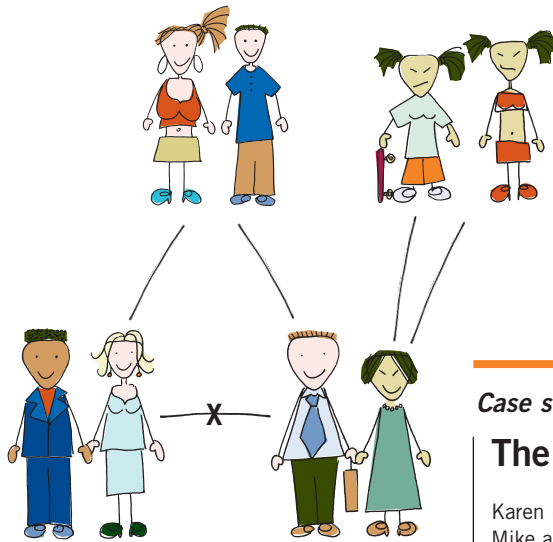


fig.2 Breakdown of families with dependent children

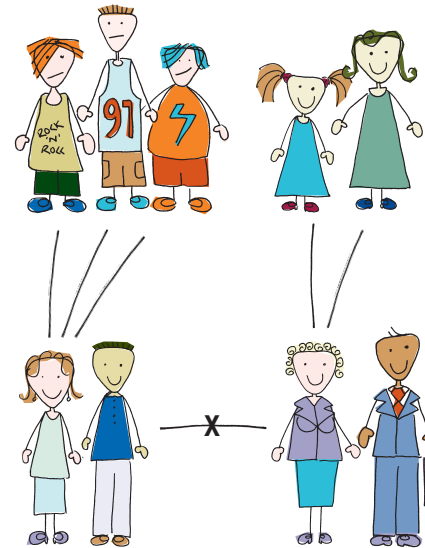




The Martins

Case study:
The Martins

Karen lives with her new partner Mike and with her two children, John aged 12 and Claire aged 16 (*they are soon to be joined by a friend of Claire's who is moving out of her father's house because of difficulties in their relationship*). The children's father lives nearby with his new wife. John visits his dad at the weekends. His dad's new wife also has two children (*girls aged 5 and 7*) who also visit at the weekends.



The Greens

Case study:
The Greens

Living at home are mum and stepdad (*recently married*), two children (*boys aged 7 and 17*), other son aged 19 is at university but lives at home in the holidays. At weekends and in the school holidays two daughters (*13 and 8*) from stepdad's previous marriage stay. Stepdaughters live with their mother and her new partner. Both sets of parents have to negotiate on parenting style/ rules for the two girls in order to avoid mixed messages about what is and is not allowed.

There have also been changes in the make-up of families as a whole. The age profile of parents is older than it was even 10 years ago. As the Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 highlighted, people are having children later in life. The average age of mothers at the time of birth in the UK is now over 29. This has increased by more than two years in the last two decades and is higher for those in higher socio-economic groups⁹. Older parents are more likely to be established in work and have greater financial security but the widening age gap may present new challenges to them as parents.

Another key trend in the make-up of families as a whole is the increase in the length of time that children are staying at home. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2002¹⁰ highlighted the significant percentage of young people in their twenties living with their parents. In 2003 over half of men aged 20-24 and over a third of females aged 20-24 were living with their parents¹¹.

We also know that it is no longer accurate to see the typical family as one in which the father is the sole breadwinner. There is increasing recognition and expectation of fathers' roles in actively caring for and bringing up children. The struggle to find a good balance between work and family life for women and men has intensified in part due to progress in increasing women's participation in the workforce but also more broadly the development of a culture of long work hours. Fathers in Britain work some of the longest hours in Europe¹². However, despite changes in the shape of the family and the increasing participation of women in the workplace, the care role of parenting is still delivered primarily by mothers.

Parents and children in the UK

- There are nearly 15 million young people aged 19 and under in the UK making up around a quarter of the total population¹³
- Over 5 million of these young people are teenagers aged 13 to 19
- Twenty-seven per cent of households in the UK are occupied by families with dependent children – this makes a total of 6.6 million households¹⁴

⁹ The average age of entry to motherhood is five years later for women with higher qualifications than it is for those without according to Smallwood and Jefferies 2003
¹⁰ Lever Fabergé Family Report 2002, Wicks and Asato
¹¹ Social Trends No 34
¹² Kodz 2003
¹³ Census 2001
¹⁴ Social Trends 34

Section two: Parental well-being

¹⁵ See for example Nickerson and Nagle 2004

¹⁶ Suldo and Huebner 2004

¹⁷ Dew and Huebner 1996

¹⁸ Eurobarometer 60.1, Autumn 2003.



The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 highlighted the complex relationship between children and happiness. It showed that children can be mixed blessings. Many parents are quick to attribute their happiness to their children, particularly mothers. But the report highlighted that children can also contribute to relationship problems, to financial difficulty, to putting career ambitions on hold (particularly for women) and to anxiety. Many parents are quick to affirm that they have no regrets about having children but the Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 stressed the need for public policy to focus on alleviating the negative impacts.

The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2004 builds on this work. It focuses on parental well-being and 'life satisfaction', a term used widely in psychological literature to describe a person's evaluation of his or her life as a whole. Parental well-being is an important focus for study. Promoting the well-being of parents is valid not only because it is likely to lead to positive outcomes for children but because it impacts on how able parents are to function in society as a whole, in their families, in the work place and in their own communities.

Research often focuses on the study of child well-being above that of parental well-being, although the two are clearly connected. There is a significant body of work on the importance of attachment for child well-being, first defined by John Bowlby in the 1950s. In brief, attachment theory asserts that security, open communication and understanding in the parent-child relationship leads to positive outcomes for children and their effective social and emotional development. This is important in the teenage as well as the early years. It is continuity of care, and not just the forming of early attachments, that children need to develop their capabilities. Studies show that both parent trust and communication with parents are good predictors of life satisfaction among adolescents¹⁵. Poor relationships between parents can have a negative impact on the well-being of both parent and child.

*"The more adolescents perceive their parents are monitoring their activities, providing them with emotional and instrumental support, and encouraging them to express individuality and think independently, the higher their life satisfaction is likely to be"*¹⁶

There is a strong link between parenting styles, the quality of parent-child relationships and child well-being. Authoritative parenting, which combines warmth, responsiveness and high expectations, is seen as the optimum parenting style and most likely to lead to child well-being. **One study found that teenagers' perception of the quality of their relationship with their parents was the strongest predictor of their life satisfaction and more important than, for example, their perception of their physical appearance**¹⁷.

A positive relationship with their parents boosts the life satisfaction of adolescents but what about the life satisfaction of parents themselves? What enhances and what impinges on the well-being of parents?

Parenting positives

Although international survey data on happiness shows that children have a statistically insignificant impact on our happiness, parents in our survey were, overwhelmingly, very or quite satisfied with their lives as parents. The overall picture is positive and shows parenting to be in good health. Forty six per cent of parents were 'very satisfied' with their life as a parent, whilst 48 per cent stated that they were 'quite satisfied'.

The total of 93 per cent of parents being satisfied with their lives is marginally higher than life satisfaction data for the whole of the UK which shows that 88 per cent of the population report being satisfied with the life they lead¹⁸. Parents also feel that being a parent has largely positive impacts on other aspects of their life. The majority state that being a parent has a mainly positive impact on their relationship, on their mood and stress level, on their general health and on their motivation and productivity at work. Children can provide shape and purpose to their parents' lives and it appears that this sense of fulfilment can rub off on their sense of drive at work and the strength of their relationship.

"Knowing that your family is strong and on your side is the best feeling ever"

Father, remarried and living with stepchildren

"The best bits are spending time together, I love doing things with them and going out to places"

Single mother

"I like having a big family, it means we don't get much of a social life sometimes but I don't miss it. I don't know what I'd do without the kids; it's a nice feeling being responsible for them"

Father with three children



fig.3 Does being a parent have a mainly positive or mainly negative impact on...

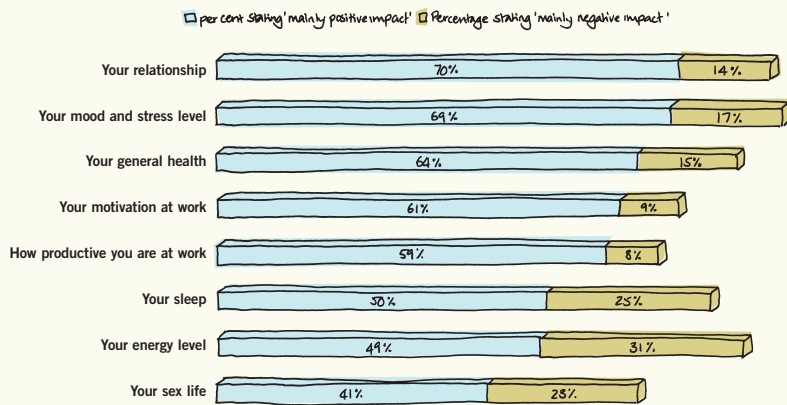
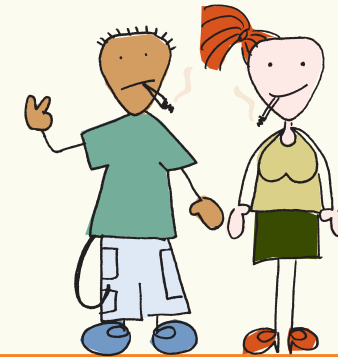
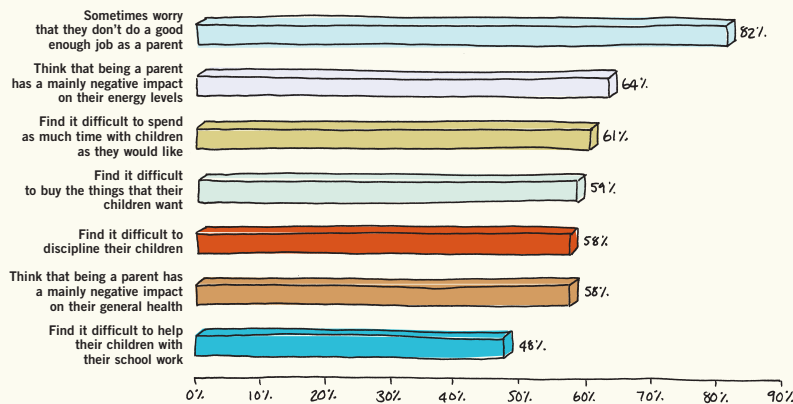


fig.4 Challenges facing parents who are not satisfied with their lives as parents



We know too, however, that having children can also have negative impacts. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 highlighted, for example, that children can put a strain on relationships. How to bring up children might be the cause of arguments within a relationship or a period of child ill-health may limit the time a couple has to spend together alone. In this year's survey of parents with teenagers, 14 per cent of parents state that being a parent had a mainly negative impact on their relationship. Being a parent can also be draining. Thirty per cent of parents state that being a parent has a mainly negative impact on their energy level and 17 per cent state that being a parent has a mainly negative impact on their mood and stress level. In relation to work, most parents state that being a parent has a mainly positive impact on their productivity and motivation in the workplace. However, we know also that the British labour market carries wage penalties for having children. There is in effect a 'mother tax' which means that women with children earn less than women without children. In addition, while fathers may feel productive and motivated as a result of having children, they also work some of the longest hours in Europe.

"My marriage broke up, I had to look after two kids, keep a job and make sure they were in school"

Father

"Spending quality time with them can be difficult as a single parent. You feel guilty about working but you need the money"

Single mother

See **fig.3**

The struggling few

While the majority of parents report being 'satisfied' with their lives, and four in ten 'very satisfied', it is important to look also at the minority of parents who report low levels of life satisfaction. **In our survey a core minority of parents, around one in seventeen (6 per cent), appear to be struggling and unhappy.** This is clearly a minority but when mapped on to the total parent population (a total of 6.6 million households in Britain are families living with dependent children) it is estimated that it represents more than 200,000 mothers and fathers. These parents report being not very or not at all satisfied with their life as parents. These parents are more likely to be lone parents, young parents (those under 35 with teenage children), those not working and parents from ethnic minority groups.

Of these parents reporting low levels of life satisfaction, eight in ten worry that they do not do a good enough job as a parent, six in ten find it difficult to spend as much time with their children as they would like and over half find it difficult to discipline their children. The quotes below, taken from parents reporting low levels of satisfaction, highlight the difficulties that parents can face.

"It's difficult because I work full time. My son has his own agenda so when I come in from work he's not at home. It means we don't have time to talk about any issues"

Mother of teenage son

"It's sex, drugs, alcohol, coming in late, not going to school. Basically doing everything they shouldn't"

Single mother with two teenage children

"Trying to get him to go to school is difficult. He's always bunking off and I find it a big problem"

Single father with a teenage son

See **fig.4**

¹⁹ Furedi 2001

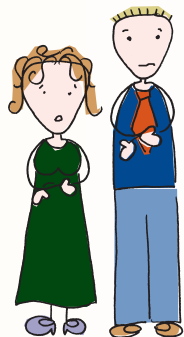
²⁰ In the 2003 Lever Fabergé Family Report 66 per cent of mothers stated that their children were what most made them happy compared to 41 per cent of fathers.

For the struggling few, there appears to be a support gap. They are faced with dilemmas which they don't always have solutions to and find it difficult to engage with their children on issues such as discipline and school work. There is evidence that these parents who are genuinely struggling and facing difficulty are doing so in silence. **Sixty-four per cent of parents who are unsatisfied with their life as a parent wish it were easier to talk to other mothers and fathers with teenage children about the challenges they face.** They may lack the social and support networks that might boost their skills and confidence as parents.

As parents of teenagers it may be more difficult to find opportunities to meet and share experiences with other parents. There is no longer the opportunity to meet other parents at the school gates or discuss matters at a parent-toddler group. It is also the case that admitting that you don't know what to do as a parent of a 13 year old may be more difficult than admitting that you don't know what to do with your three year old. Parents of teenagers are expected to know what they're doing by the time their children reach their teens, even if some of the challenges they face may make parents feel like they're starting from scratch.

Parenting anxiety

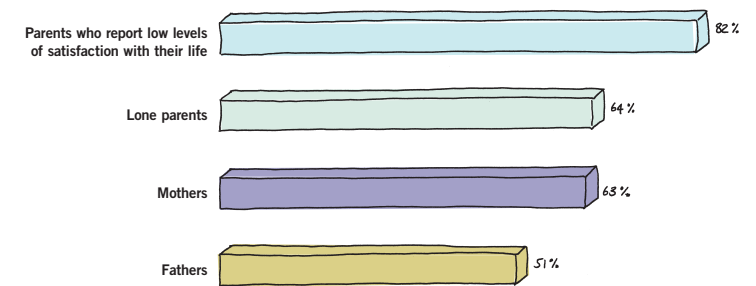
Parenting anxiety is not only felt by those who report low levels of life satisfaction, it is widespread. The majority of both mothers and fathers are critical of the job they do as parents and worry that they don't always get it right. Over half of parents with teenagers sometimes worry that they do not do a good enough job. That parents worry about how they perform is neither unexpected nor a bad thing in itself. The ability of parents to successfully guide their children's social and emotional development has a significant impact on how well we function as a society. The level of worry reflects broader trends in parental anxiety and the perception that children are exposed to greater threats today than they were in the past¹⁹.



The gender distribution of parental worry is important to look at. Mothers and lone parents, who are predominantly women, are most likely to worry about the job they do as parents, with over six in ten worrying that they sometimes don't do a good enough job. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2003 demonstrated that mothers were more likely than fathers to attribute their happiness to their children²⁰. It appears that mothers are also more likely than fathers to worry about their ability to be a good parent. This is likely to reflect the more involved role that women play in care-giving and the more time they spend with their children, in the teenage years as well as in childhood. It may also reflect a difference in the extent to which mothers and fathers feel that their achievements are judged by the contribution they make to their families above the contribution they make in the workplace. Although more active in the workplace, mothers may judge themselves as much (if not more) on the job they do in the home. Fathers are not far behind however. Half of fathers with teenage children sometimes worry that they do not do a good enough job as a father. As expectations of fathers to be active in care-giving and in the home increase, fathers may become as critical of the job they do as fathers as mothers are of the job they do as mothers.

See **fig.5**

fig.5 Percentage of parents who agree 'I sometimes worry...'



Section three: The parenting life course



The job of parenting is not one that stays static. Parents must continually adapt to new challenges and issues as their children grow up. The parents in this study all had at least one teenager living at home, over half also had younger children. Their discussion of the difficult times tells us much about the transition points that can raise most problems for parents. It highlights that the teenage years, particularly the early teens, prove most challenging. Here, parents describe what it is about each stage that makes the job of parenting difficult.

Thinking about your oldest child still living at home, what has been the most difficult age for you as a father/mother?

Pregnancy and the first year - 2 per cent

"It was my first baby and I wasn't sure if I was doing everything right. I went back to work quickly and I had to deal with the guilt"

Mother

"It's a shock being a parent for the first time"

Mother

"Everything was new, every tiny hiccup we'd worry as it was the first time for us"

Father

"I was away a lot with work and I missed out a lot of that brooding with my wife"

Father

One to five years - 7 per cent

"She was very active and hardly ever slept, I was always tired!"

Mother

"When he was that age I would take him to the playgroup but the system wasn't geared up for dads. I would be the only dad there. That's probably changing now"

Father

"I was working away from home and I found it difficult to bond. He was very close to his mother but it was very hard for me to get close to him"

Father

"She was a little terror, very active. If we went shopping she would run away and go and find things to do. I had to keep my eye on her all the time. Because we spent a lot of time at home we had to find different things to do all the time"

Mother

"I had three boys under the age of five and my husband at the time could only find work away from home. I was basically on my own with them Monday to Friday"

Mother



6 to 12 years – 8 per cent

“They’re getting ready to go to secondary school and they start changing. At 10 and 11 they’re quite strange, they try to be older than they are”

Mother

“Discipline is really hard, physical punishment used to work but now you can only do something like stopping them watching TV”

Mother

“She was being bullied at school and we didn’t know about it. It really affected her behaviour”

Mother

“We had a child with special needs and the school didn’t really understand what his needs were”

Father

“Once they start school they mix with other children and start to use bad language. They were mixing with children whose parents could afford things that I couldn’t afford. They see how far they can push you as a parent”

Mother



13 to 15 years - 51 per cent

“She thinks she knows everything and I know nothing”

Mother

“He thinks he’s 18 but he’s actually only coming up to 14”

Mother

“At that age they are pushing the rules of the home to see how far you will go. They are moving towards independence. They challenge you to see what they can get away with”

Mother

“Her peer group is becoming more important to her than her family”

Mother

“She is growing up too fast. She looks after herself, she does everything herself”

Father



16 to 18 years - 24 per cent

“It’s hard to implement rules because they don’t take any notice”

Father

“He wants to get good exam results but he is not prepared to do the work, he wants to have use of the home but he is not prepared to chip in with housework, he wants his clothes clean and presentable but isn’t prepared to do any washing”

Father

“He was a little toe rag when he was 16, he was trying to assert his authority and thought he was grown up”

Mother

“He takes no notice of what I say, that’s because he doesn’t listen to anything he doesn’t really want to listen to”

Mother

“She thinks she should have more freedom than she is allowed. She totally disagrees with everything I say and wants to do her own thing”

Mother

Section four: The testing teens

²¹ All statistics in this section taken from Communities that Care 2002

²² Henricson and Roker 2000



Three quarters of parents think that the teenage years are the most difficult with the early teens proving most difficult. Half of all parents (51 per cent) surveyed stated that thirteen to fifteen years were the most difficult ages to deal with as a parent, whilst almost a quarter of parents (24 per cent) stated that sixteen to eighteen years were most difficult.

The finding is intuitive. The challenges of the difficult transition to the teenage years are well-documented. This is a time of considerable biological and physiological changes as well as one when young people are seeking and demanding greater autonomy and independence. Young people have to make the transition to secondary school where exams loom and peer pressure can intensify. Parents, as well as teenagers, have to find ways to negotiate these changes.



“Between 13 and 15 she was most uneasy about who she was, what kind of friends she wanted to have and so on. Making her feel confident about that and helping her was difficult. It got to a stage where we sat down together to talk about things like what time to go out with friends, how late she could stay out, what was safe etc”

Mother

“In adolescence they go through periods of insanity! They don't think straight, they have strong emotions, the hormones are flying, girls have period problems, they just don't see things properly!”

Father

The overwhelming emphasis on the early teens as the most difficult time points to the crucial stage in children's development that the ages from 13 to 15 represent. Parents may have 13 years of experience under their belt at this point but the transition to the teen years may make them feel that they are starting from scratch.

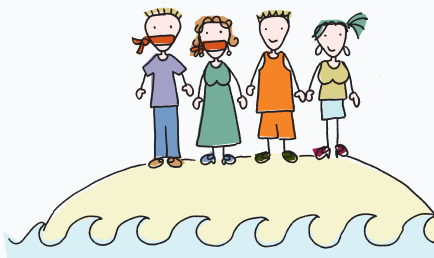
“With teenagers it can be scary not having someone there to share things with. I worry about them not having a father figure and I'd like someone to share the stress with! You can feel that you're losing control – sometimes you have to think ‘Do I hope for the best or do I stop them from doing something?’”

Single mother with two daughters

Statistics support parents in their assessment that the ages from thirteen to fifteen are challenging by illustrating significant changes in young people's attitudes, behaviour and exposure to outside influences during this time. In addition to the potentially difficult transition to secondary school it is clear that the early teens are a time for experimentation and testing boundaries. One national survey of secondary school students demonstrates that young people's reports of involvement in problem behaviour such as vandalising property and shoplifting peak at the ages of fourteen and fifteen (although it is still a minority that get involved). The same survey shows that young people's reported consumption of alcohol rises sharply during these years. While less than ten per cent of 11 and 12 year olds report drinking regularly, 30 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds do so. The same increase can be seen on factors like truancy and school exclusions.

Nine per cent of 10 and 11 year olds report playing truant in the last year, 34 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds report having done so. On school exclusions, while seven per cent of ten and 11 year old have been excluded from school, this figure has more than doubled by the ages of 14 and 15²¹. It is important to avoid the impression that the behaviour of 13, 14 and 15 year olds is overwhelmingly negative but the statistics above highlight some of the challenges that parents may be faced with during these years.

Many parents accept this difficult transition as a normal part of growing up. For the majority, while the teen years can be difficult, they are still relatively trouble-free years. For most it is a challenging time rather than a time of crisis. At this difficult time, research shows that the dependency of teenagers on their mothers for social and emotional support tends to be greater than it is on their fathers. Often mothers invest considerably more time and are more involved in parenting during adolescence than fathers. They are more engaged in care-giving, while fathers' contact tends to be focused on joint leisure activities. Mothers are generally closer to adolescents of both sexes, providing them with more support and being more aware of their developmental changes than fathers²².



Parenting in silence

The challenge for parents is in knowing what to do when faced with new dilemmas. Parents recognise that they need to let go but do not always know by how much. They fear that their children are growing up too fast and want to experience things earlier than they would like. They can struggle in finding the right balance between giving their children new freedoms and independence at the same time as setting boundaries and rules. The dilemmas parents face can range from judging when to let their teenage children go on holiday with friends, to agreeing how much pocket money to give them, to deciding how to broach the issue of drink and drugs or agreeing how late children can stay out. Parents negotiate these dilemmas primarily in the privacy of the family even though they share them in common with countless other parents.

“At 13 they think that they know it all and want to try everything out. My job as a parent is to try to guide them through what’s right and wrong”

Mother

“As a parent it’s difficult to let go and let them do what they want, because they are not grown up”

Mother

“They just seem to get a mind of their own. They think they are adult before their time”

Father

“I’m scared for him because he’s growing up and he looks like a man and he’s not!”

Mother

For some parents this is a time when they can feel vulnerable and exposed in their job as a parent. The ‘struggling few’ - those parents who feel they lack the skills, knowledge, influence or experience to help and support their children through the difficult times - need to be a priority for support.

“It was very challenging. I’ve not much experience. I find adolescents difficult to deal with, the moodiness and things. I don’t have a husband so there’s no male input”

Mother

“It is difficult because I’m trying to get him to go to school and being threatened with court action because he doesn’t go”

Mother

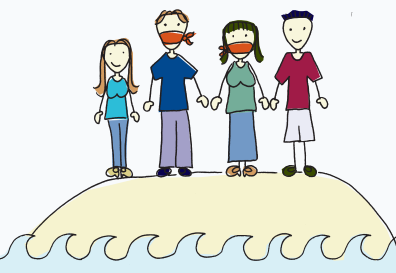
“She ran away from home and didn’t go to school, it was very upsetting”

Mother

“She was reaching puberty and I’m a single parent. It was just very hard”

Father

Part of the support that parents going through real difficulty are calling for is the opportunity to discuss and share the challenges they face with others going through the same experiences. But a majority of parents appear to be supportive of more hands-on interventions such as parenting classes, particularly for those who are struggling. When asked whether parents should attend parenting classes if their children repeatedly get into trouble, 85 per cent of parents agreed that they should. This suggests support for high levels of public intervention in instilling parental responsibility for those parents who appear to be ‘failing’. However, comments made by parents in the case study interviews suggests that support for parenting classes may be seen as much as a supportive measure to help parents develop their skills as it is a means of enforcing parental responsibility. Comments also demonstrate an awareness that parents don’t parent in a vacuum but in the context of the community and society in which they live. However, parents tend to talk about parenting classes as an option for *other* parents; they are seen as a last resort rather than an option for all.



“I know from experience how hard it can be to develop skills as a parent, it didn’t come naturally to me. If someone really doesn’t have an idea then maybe they do need help to get some skills. It needs to be done sensitively though”

Single father

“Parents have to take responsibility for their children, you have to set up rules and regulations. But part of the problem is not the parents but the areas they live in. We see through friends of Claire’s how kids can be brought up in really difficult areas which are rundown and where they see people around them on drugs, not going to work and so on”

Mother

“Parenting classes might be helpful in some circumstances but teenagers come under pressure from so many sources that just blaming the parents isn’t always helpful”

Single mother



Case study:

The Martins

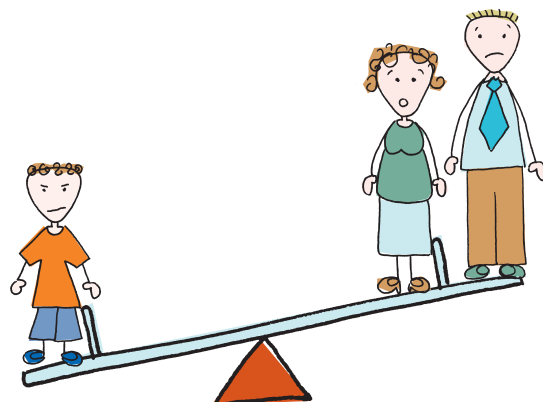
Karen and Mike live with Karen's two kids from her first marriage, Claire (16) and John (12). They worry about John as he's been playing up since he moved to secondary school. Karen is concerned that he's a 'follower' and seems to get into trouble if other people are leading the way. She thinks that the divorce had a bad impact on John because he witnessed a lot of arguments and worries that this will come out more as he hits his teenage years. However, Karen and Mike's biggest worry at the moment is the fact that Claire has booked a holiday in the summer with some friends, including one other girl and two boys. Claire saved up the money herself and bought the holiday – *"There was no arguing with her"*. Karen is resigned to the fact that she will spend the whole week while Claire is away, worrying about her – *"You've got to be able to judge whether you think they're capable of doing something. You've got to let them go. I feel confident about her being sensible; I just worry about the other people around her"*.



Case study:

The Greens

Christine and James live with Christine's two sons Max (17) and David (7), James' two daughters Jenny (13) and Sophie (8) stay at weekends and in the school holidays. Christine's oldest son, Adam (19), is at university but comes home in the holidays. Being parents of teenagers hasn't been as hard as they feared but they have had teething problems. James has found it difficult to know how to act with Christine's three sons and doesn't want to try to replace their real dad. Things came to a head when he chucked Adam out of the house when he came home one morning drunk and abusive. They have patched things up since. The worst thing about being parents of teenagers is the constant worry, they say. Max has a moped and Christine doesn't relax until he's home safely each time he goes out – *"I tried to argue him out of buying one but in the end I told him that if he could afford it he could get it"*. Christine and James try to be open with their children – *"Max was best man at our wedding and he pulled the daughter of one of my friends. I told him to be sensible and gave him a condom!"*.



The see-saw effect

The teenage years are trickiest for parents and while most get through them without too much difficulty, some really struggle. The number of difficult dilemmas that parents face is likely to go up as their children hit their teenage years, but parents' perception of the support they receive from society goes down. Rather than feeling supported they are more likely to feel isolated.

Seventy four per cent of parents think that society is more supportive of parents with younger children than it is of parents with teenagers. At a time when parents are most likely to be judged against their children's behaviour it appears that we do least to support and encourage them to do a good job. This raises questions about whether we do enough to provide parents with the skills, support, resources and environment in which families with teenagers can thrive.

"The teenage years are most difficult as a parent but there's much more support for parents of younger children. It's harder to do things together with teenage children because they don't want their mum along but at the same time you worry about what they're getting up to. There's not enough affordable stuff going on that I feel happy about her going to"

Single mother

"When you've got teenagers you're just expected to get on with it. There are no out-of-school activities or organised youth centres round here so money dictates what sorts of things they can do"

Father

The support framework in place for parents of younger children, including parent-toddler groups, playgroups, initiatives such as the Sure Start programme and the right to request flexible working arrangements for parents of children under six are not matched with similar provision for parents of teenagers. Parents with teenage children point to the lack of affordable and accessible activities and places for teenagers as a key area where they could be offered greater support. They recognise that they need to allow their children more freedom and independence but worry that there is a limited choice of things for teenagers to do and places to go that are safe and affordable. Forty five per cent state that more activities and youth centres would most improve their life as a parent.



Section five: Parenting pitfalls

²³ See for example NFPI 2001



fig.6 Percentage of parents stating that they have a more difficult job than their own mother or father

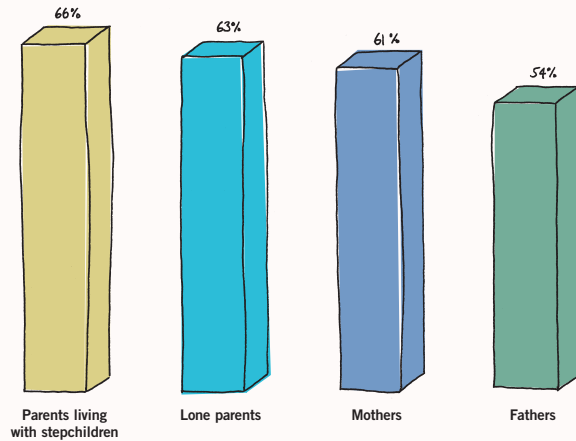
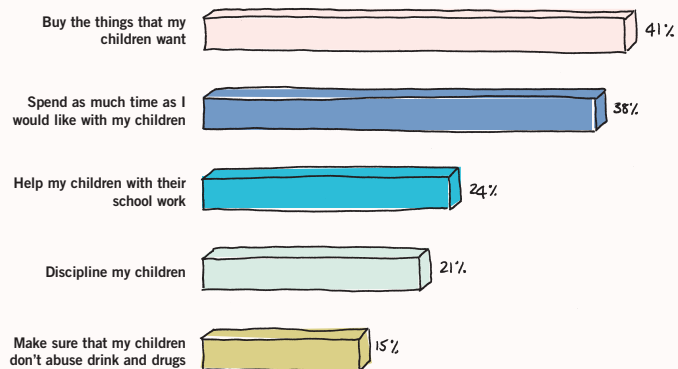


fig.7 How easy or difficult do you find it to do each of the following as a parent?

Percentage of parents who find it very or quite difficult



Parenting is often described as a process of trial and error which each parent must negotiate for themselves; essentially a private rather than public activity. We have seen however, that how parents perform as parents and what they do is increasingly a theme of public policy debates and scrutiny. We have also seen how the teenage years pose particular challenges for parents and present dilemmas to which they do not always have the answers. In this section we explore the things that impinge on the ability of parents to do the 'good job' that society expects of them and ask them what challenges they face. Understanding these challenges is important if we are to assess whether we do enough to provide parents with the tools, resources, support and environment to enable them to do well.

There is consensus among parents on the central themes that underpin 'good' parenting and support family life: spending time together as a family; setting a good example; making children feel happy and loved and establishing a positive relationship between parents²³ for example.

"You're not taught how to be a husband or father. You just have to do it by experience and trial and error"

Father, remarried and living with stepchildren

"You can't be perfect but you do worry about doing the right thing"

Single mother with two daughters

"Spending time together as a family is the most important thing we can do for our children"

Mother living with partner and three children

Parents may agree on the basics of parenting but the majority feel that they have a more difficult job than their own parents. **Sixty one per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers think that they have a more difficult job than their own mother and father.** Parents living with stepchildren and lone parents were even more likely to assert that they have a harder job than their own parents. It is possible that each generation will always judge its job as parents to be more difficult than that of the previous generation. However, the high percentage of lone parents and parents living with stepchildren who believe they have a more difficult job than their own parents suggests that the more diverse family structures that exist today present new and complex challenges.

See **fig.6**

Case study:

Mr Martin

Mike is married to Karen and is stepfather to her children Claire (16) and John (13). He gets on really well with both children but found it difficult when he first moved in to know how to act – *"I didn't want to replace their dad and wade in laying down the law. I never thought they'd open up to me but now they see me as a mate"*. It took a while for Mike to prove to Claire and John's natural father that he wasn't trying to step on his toes. Now Mike has been living with the family for a couple of years he feels a bit more confident about being involved in family decisions – *"I feel like I've got more input now into how things work around here, we're trying to build ourselves up as a family and I want to be able to contribute"*.

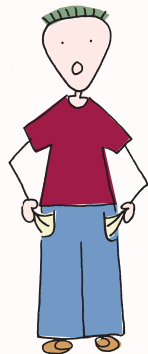
²⁴ see for example Ghate and Hazel 2001
²⁵ Mintel research reports 2004
²⁶ The Guardian, 4 May 2004
²⁷ Social Trends 34
²⁸ Gordon et al 2000
²⁹ NFPI, October 2001



Money, time, school work and behaviour = key problem areas

In the survey, parents were asked to what extent they found various aspects of parenting easy or difficult. It is clear that money and time matter. Top of the list of things that parents find difficult are being able to buy the things that their children want and spending as much time as they would like with their children. Four in ten parents find it difficult to buy the things that their children want and over three in ten parents find it difficult to spend as much time as they would like with their children. Further down the list but still difficult for a significant minority of parents are helping children with school work, disciplining children and making sure that children don't abuse drink and drugs. Each of these difficult areas is addressed below.

See **fig.7**



1. Money matters

More than four in ten parents find it difficult to buy the things that their children want. That money is a factor in making parenting difficult is not surprising. Research consistently shows that parents place 'more money' and financial support high on the list of things that would improve their lives. Other studies similarly put financial help at the top of the list of things that would most improve the lives of parents²⁴.

There are two stories behind the fact that a significant number of parents find it difficult to buy their children what they want in our study. The first concerns the extent to which parents are faced with pressure from their children to spend money on them. Parents are facing demands for pocket money, clothes and consumer goods from children keen to keep up with their peers²⁵. The level of spending on children expected and encouraged of today's parents appears to be greater than it was twenty or thirty years ago.

Figures put the cost of raising a child from birth to university as high as £164,000²⁶, taking into account the cost of food, childcare, housing, clothing, consumer goods, education and trips out. It is not just a problem for those on lower incomes. One in three parents in higher income groups find it difficult to buy the things their children want. When asked what they argue about most with their children, parents in our survey put money second on the list with more than one in ten parents stating it was what they argued about most with their children.

"They have this idea that money grows on trees and there's no real understanding of the work and effort you have to put in"

Father with two children

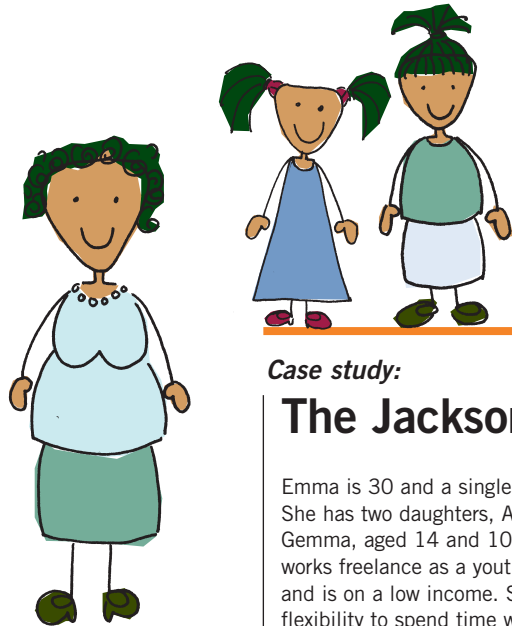
"I don't earn as much as her friend's parents do but she thinks because her friends have got stuff then she should have it too. I can't afford it though"

Mother with two children



The second story behind the large number of parents who find it difficult to buy what their children want is a more fundamental and worrying one. It concerns the number of parents who feel unable to provide what their children *need*, let alone what their children *want*. The evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of families struggle to get by financially is compelling. Data shows that children are disproportionately present in low-income households: 21 per cent of children (2.7million) were living in households with below 60 per cent of median income in Britain in 2001/2002²⁷. Poverty studies exploring the extent to which families are able to provide necessities, including adequate clothing and shoes, a warm home and a healthy diet, show that 18 per cent of children go without two or more necessities²⁸. In a National Family and Parenting Institute survey²⁹, 14 per cent of parents and 21 per cent of black and ethnic minority parents stated that 'making ends meet' was their biggest concern as a parent. A similar percentage stated that their biggest anxiety was being able to provide for their children. Parents on low incomes face anxiety and stress in their struggle to provide their children with food, clothes and a decent place to live as well as treats and trips out.





Case study:
The Jacksons

Emma is 30 and a single mother. She has two daughters, Aysha and Gemma, aged 14 and 10. Emma works freelance as a youth worker and is on a low income. She has flexibility to spend time with her daughters but she misses the holiday and sick pay that she would get from being employed on a contract – *“Sometimes there’s just no money to spare, I always have to make sure I’ve got work coming up”*. Emma enjoys spending time with her daughters. The family like going swimming, camping and eating out. The costs are high though – *“It’s expensive taking three people out and if I don’t have much work on we can’t afford to do things”*. Emma also wishes they had a bigger house. They live in a two bedroom house so the girls have to share a bedroom which causes lots of arguments, particularly as they get older.

2. Work-life balance matters for parents of teenagers as well as younger children

Second on the list of things that parents find most difficult is spending as much time with their children as they would like. Forty one per cent of fathers and 35 per cent of mothers state that they find it quite or very difficult to spend as much time with their children as they would like. Taking just those parents working full-time, 45 per cent of full-time working mothers and fathers say that they find it difficult to spend the time they want with their children. Spending time with your children is equated with good parenting and this finding echoes with previous studies which emphasise how balancing work and family life can cause stress, anxiety and guilt.

“It’s difficult working full-time and making sure that she and her friends behave themselves when I’m not at home”

Single mother with a teenage daughter

“I’d like to spend more time with them. I had to do loads of extra hours last year but I’m now doing less. If more work came along though I’d probably have to take it otherwise I’d be out of business”

Father with three children

The proportion of UK employees working long hours has increased over the last decade with 11 per cent of employees in the UK working more than 48 hours a week³⁰. Men are significantly more likely to work long hours than women and fathers are slightly more likely than non-fathers to do so. It is estimated that 40 per cent of employees in the UK have dependent children³¹. Parents with young children now have the right to request flexible working patterns. Almost a quarter of employees with children under six have requested to work flexibly since April 2003 when the new legislation was introduced, with the majority being allowed to do so³².

Our survey shows, however, that parents of teenagers also have difficulty spending the time they want with their children. It is not just in the early years that parents may want more flexibility in the hours that they work and more time to spend with their children. This suggests a need to focus on access to flexible working arrangements for parents of older as well as younger children. Part of the challenge is in creating an environment in which it is legitimate for parents of teenagers to ask for time off or flexible working hours, in order to attend school events or simply spend time with their teenagers when they’re going through difficulties, for example. It may be that it is more acceptable for those with younger children to negotiate flexible arrangements on family grounds than it is for parents of teenagers.



Case study:

The Silvers

John and Shireen live with their three children, Naomi (15), Deb (12) and Mark (3). John works full-time as an electrician and Shireen works in a call centre three evenings a week. They find it difficult to eat together as a family in the week as Shireen gets in late from work, but they do make sure that they eat together as a family every Friday. They feel that neither of their employers is flexible about taking time off when one of the children is ill or they want to attend an event at school. Both would like to see equal maternity and paternity pay on offer. John was working very long hours for good money last year but he has since cut down his hours – “it was more important to have the time together than the money”. Both still think that they don’t have enough time with the children – “I wish we had more time to spend with them but we’ve got to work too”.

Work clearly plays a part in how much time parents are able to spend with their children. For parents of teenagers there is also another dimension involved. As children grow older the amount of time they spend with their friends and away from home increases with their independence. Parents can find this transition difficult. They want to keep in touch and stay involved in their children’s lives but do not always feel able to do so. Young people in turn can be frustrated by the extent to which their parents want to be involved in their lives.

“Recently he hasn’t wanted to spend much time with us, I find that hard, it’s quite upsetting”

Father with one teenage son and three daughters

“It feels like she’s starting to go away from us now, and get on with her own life”

Mother with three children talking about her 14 year old daughter

“I don’t really want to spend as much time with my mum and sister anymore, I’d rather be with my friends... It’s shameful to be out with my mum, she always wants to drop me off and pick me up from places when I want to go on my own. I’m not going to go on the family holiday in the summer because it will just be boring”

Teenage girl, 14, living with her mum and sister

3. Helping with school work

Almost a quarter of parents in our survey state that they find it difficult to help their children with their school work. The importance of parental involvement in their child’s learning is increasingly emphasised in education policy yet emphasis tends to focus more on parents with younger children. In our survey, all of the parents had teenage children and their comments suggest that many find it difficult to keep their children focused and engaged with their school work.

“I find it difficult to get him to understand the importance of school work and exams, he needs to know that those three weeks of exams are important”

Father with one 17 year old son

“Getting him to understand that if he focused on his school work he would reap rewards when it comes to a job, is difficult. There are too many distractions and their expectations are unrealistic”

Father with two sons, including a 15 year old

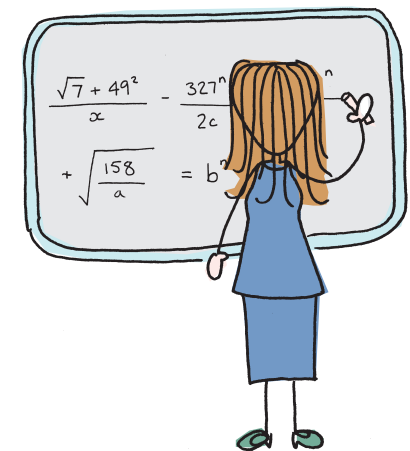
The difficulty that parents of teenagers find in helping their children with their school work appears to be more than a result of their children’s unwillingness to let them help. Some parents in our case study work also described how they felt shut out by their child’s school and feared that they would be seen as interfering if they took a more active role. While education policy aims to strengthen the links between home and school it appears that schools have some way to go in welcoming and engaging with parents as partners in their children’s learning³³.

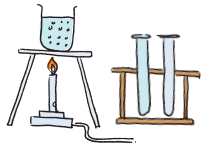
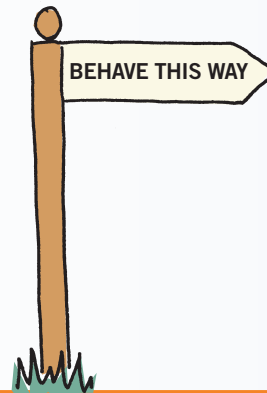
“I don’t think the school supports parents of teenagers. I’ve been in to see the teachers a couple of times recently when I’ve been worried about my daughter’s work but nothing happened. I don’t think they took me seriously”

Single mother

“When she moved up to junior school I wanted to get a feel for who her teachers were and her friends, but I got the impression that they wanted to keep me at a distance. You feel you have to push yourself on them as a parent, I don’t want that to happen, I just want to get a feel for the place”

Father





“School isn’t interested in us getting involved. Parents don’t have much contact with teachers and they’re difficult to reach. I’d like to be more involved but I think they’d think that I was interfering”

Mother with three children

The extent to which school support can play an important role in making parents feel confident and able in their job is reflected in the fact that almost one in five parents in our survey call for more support from their child’s school as the thing that would most improve their life as a parent.

4. Guiding behaviour

Debates in the media and in government around anti-social behaviour, youth crime, drink and drug taking, teenage pregnancy, childhood obesity, poor educational achievement and so on, are often quick to put parents in the spotlight. Parents are expected, naturally, to instil positive values and behaviour in their children. The introduction of fines for parents of children who persistently truant is one manifestation of the belief that parental responsibility sometimes needs to be enforced rather than left to chance.

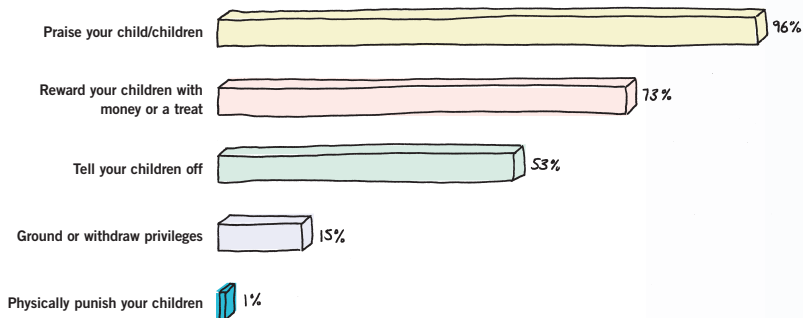
Parental capacity to instil positive values and behaviour in children may be hindered by a number of factors, however. Living in a rundown neighbourhood where there is little to do; the type of school their child goes to; who their children associate with; how much stress they have to deal with in their own lives; whether they are financially able to provide for their child and so on, can all impact on how able parents are to be a ‘good’ parent. Parents do have responsibility for their children’s behaviour but it could be argued that they also have a right to live in a society which creates a supportive environment in which to raise children.

For the majority of parents, monitoring and guiding their children’s behaviour does not pose significant problems. The tactics parents use to guide and encourage their children on the whole demonstrate a positive model of parenting. Parents, for example, state that they are far more likely to reward and praise their children than they are to tell them off. Only one per cent of parents report physically punishing their children very or quite often, with 21 per cent saying that they do physically punish their children but ‘not very often’. Parents of teenagers often emphasise the importance of negotiation, open communication and agreeing boundaries.

However, discipline is a problem for a significant minority. One in five parents in our survey found it difficult to discipline their children, suggesting that it is not always an easy task. Their comments suggest difficulty negotiating boundaries with their teenage children and knowing when to let them be independent and discover things for themselves. In the teenage years, the extent to which their children are exposed to outside influences such as drink, drugs, friends and the media can be a problem. Parents can feel that their ability to counter what they see as negative influences is limited.

fig.8 How often do you do each of the following as a parent?

Percentage of parents stating ‘very’ or ‘quite’ often



“I’m not going to clamp down on things just for the sake of it, I just expect her to tell me about it so we can discuss it. If you resist things they just do them secretly anyway and that’s even worse. You need to be able to talk about things openly”

Lone father

“I have to let go a bit now he’s a teenager. You have to trust them and talk to them as an adult. We have proper arguments now but we’re still really close!”

Mother

“She is argumentative, she doesn’t listen, she just does as she pleases”

Mother with three children including a 15 year old daughter

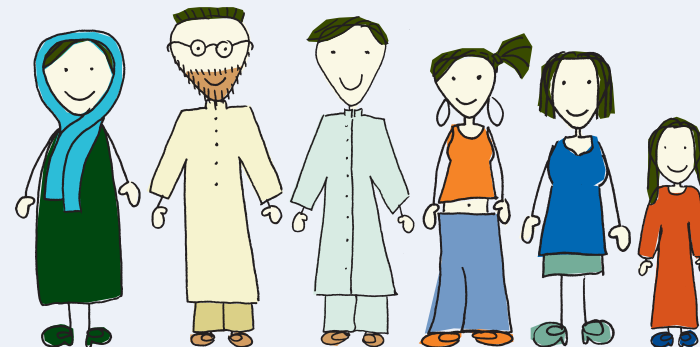
“She’s very strong willed and thinks she knows better than me. I’m divorced so she also plays me off against my ex-husband and says that he lets her do things that I don’t”

Single mother

“It’s drummed into them that when you become a teenager you have an attitude. He thinks he has an excuse to be rude”

Father

See fig.8



This concurs with previous research with parents of teens. One survey found that more than a fifth of parents placed their children's behaviour as their biggest concern. Concern was highest among parents from ethnic minorities with 27 per cent stating that their children's behaviour was their biggest concern, compared to 21 per cent of all parents³⁴. Another highlighted that the most common reports made to the national telephone helpline Parentline Plus were for a range of 'problem' behaviours – not attending school, staying away from home without permission and physical aggression and behaviour³⁵.

On drink and drugs issues, parents with teenagers can also find it difficult to guide the choices their children make. Fifteen per cent of parents in our survey find it difficult to make sure that their children don't abuse drink or drugs. The figure rises to 35 per cent among parents who report being unsatisfied with their lives, suggesting that the ability of parents to guide their children to make sensible choices in relation to drink and drugs has a significant impact on parental well-being. Parents feel powerless to influence the choices their children make about drink and drugs.

"My 14 year old daughter was seeing a 21 year old and there was nothing I could do about it. He was introducing her to drink, drugs and stealing cars..."

Father with three children

"Between the ages of 13 and 15 my daughter became a problem and started drinking a lot"

Father with two children

"When the issue of alcohol came up, I found it very difficult to instil in her values other than those of her friends i.e. not to drink alcohol"

Single mother talking about her 14 year old daughter

It is a particular concern that parents with teenagers appear to suffer in silence and deal with difficulties in private. Over half of the parents in our survey wish it were easier to talk to other mothers and fathers with teenagers about the challenge of being a parent. Parents do not always feel able to admit that they don't know what to do and that their children sometimes present them with challenges that they don't have the answers to. They fear that they may be stigmatised as they should know what to do. This is particularly true for parents with teenagers who feel that they are already expected to be experts in childrearing.

Case study:

The Shahs

Iqbal and Naseem live with their seventeen year old son and three daughters aged thirteen, eleven and six. They find it difficult to bring up their children to be Muslims as they know they are exposed to lots of other influences at school, in the media and in society as a whole. Naseem thinks that being very strict is the only way to try to keep the children within the Muslim faith - *"I know that they think that I'm a controlling mother"*. As parents, Iqbal and Naseem worry a lot about their teenage son. They know that it will be very easy for him to start going to clubs and have a drink because *"that's what most of his friends do"*. Their son understands why his parents are strict but still feels frustrated that he can't go out with his friends. He thinks they should trust him more - *"parents should let children make their own mistakes, otherwise they'll never learn properly"*.

Case study:

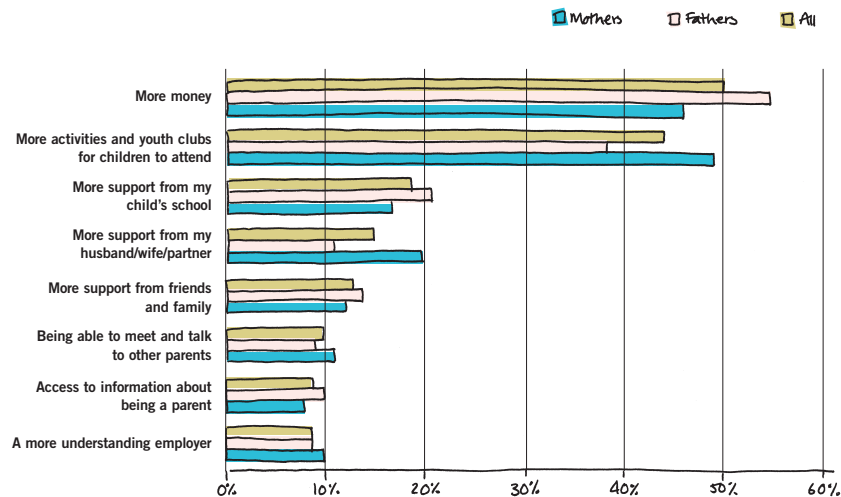
The Jacksons

Emma recently found some cannabis in her daughter Aysha's coat pocket. She already suspected that she was smoking because of her mood swings and because she was hanging around with a new group of friends who she hadn't brought home. Emma confronted Aysha but rather than just tell her not to smoke she went through the risks and dangers with her. She thought this was more likely to make her stop - *"I asked her what it made her feel like and she told me she'd started smoking cannabis because she was bored in the summer holidays. I think she's stopped now but I still worry about her"*.



Section six: Implications

fig.9 Which of the following would most improve your life as a parent?



The research findings point to a number of changes that would boost support for parents, particularly those with teenagers. Parents of teenagers need to feel more supported and less isolated. Policy makers, employers and society at large need to recognise that the challenges of being a parent can increase rather than decrease as children reach their teenage years. While it is normal for parents to discuss teething problems or the 'terrible twos', we leave parents to cope with the 'testing teens' largely in silence, focusing our attention on parents only when things go wrong. In this section, we set out thinking on three areas where greater support for parents of teenagers could make a tangible difference to the well-being of both parents and teenagers; more money and time, the provision of accessible and affordable activities for young people and the widespread development of parent support networks.

See fig.9



1. More money, more time

We have seen that money matters to parents. A significant number of parents struggle to buy the things that their children want. This reflects pressures on parents to spend on consumer goods for their children. Parents may fear that their children will be left out if they don't buy them the things that they want. Some parents feel pressure to show that they can afford items that other parents can buy. Money matters not just because expectations of spending on children are high, however. It also reflects the fact that many children live in low income households where making ends meet is a priority. Data shows that children are disproportionately present in low-income households and single parent households are more likely to be on low incomes than couple households. Bringing up children is costly and financial pressures have a negative impact on individual and family well-being. Some parents can't afford what their children need, let alone what their children want.

Given this context it is not surprising that half of parents in our survey say that more money would help them out most. This rises to 60 per cent of parents on lower incomes and lone parents. There is a need to look at the financial support in place for parents, particularly those on the lowest incomes, to ensure that all parents have the capacity to provide their children with a decent home and standard of living.

Another conclusion to draw from our research is the need for greater focus on parents with teenagers in work-life balance debates. It is not just parents with younger children who would like more time to spend with their children but those with teenagers too. Part of the challenge for government and employers is to create an environment in which it is legitimate for parents of teenagers to ask for time off or flexible working hours in order to attend school events or simply spend time with their teenagers when they're going through difficulties. It may be that it is more acceptable for those with younger children to negotiate flexible arrangements on family grounds than it is for parents of teenagers to do so. Currently only parents with children under six have a right to ask their employer for flexible working arrangements.



2. More activities

Parents with teenage children point to the lack of affordable and accessible activities and places for teenagers as a key area where they could be offered greater support. Forty five per cent state that more activities and youth centres would most improve their life as a parent. Mothers and those on lower incomes were most likely to call for the provision of more activities and youth centres. Parents recognise that they need to allow their children more freedom and independence but worry that there is a limited choice of things for teenagers to do and places to go that are safe and affordable. This is consistent with other surveys. A 2002 MORI survey, for example, found that six out of ten teenagers and eight out of ten parents think that there is not enough for teenagers to do in the area where they live.

"It's difficult to find recreational things with children aged 14 or 15. It's hard to find things to do with them when you're on a tight budget. It's much easier when they're younger"

Mother

"There's not a lot to do at that age (13 to 15 years). It's restrictive. There's not many youth clubs to keep their interest and no organised activities unless you are prepared to pay"

Mother

"There are no youth clubs or anything. They can either hang around the streets and get into trouble or they can stay in and play Playstation"

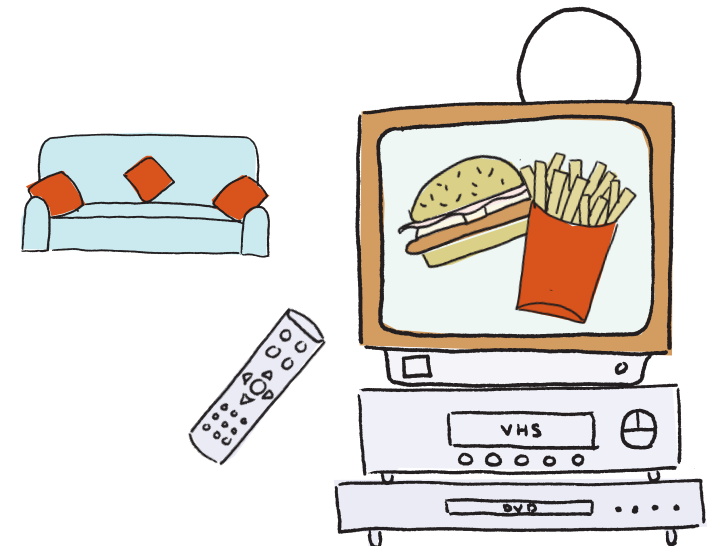
Father

This call for provision of activities for children can be linked to the fact that parents of teens feel less supported by society than parents of younger children. Greater provision of affordable activities and the widespread provision of modern youth clubs could lead to a sense that government, and society as a whole, supports and values teenagers and their parents. For some parents, the current choice is between letting their teenagers 'hang-out' with their friends where they may be perceived by others as a nuisance or encouraging them to stay inside where they are likely to be more inactive, watching television and playing computer games.



In developing activities and places for teenagers to 'hang-out' there is a need for imagination and an understanding of what young people are looking for. The traditional image of the 'youth club' held in a dusty church hall will hold little appeal for many teenagers. However, no national strategy is in place to revive the often tired, out-of-date and often closed youth centres that are currently available³⁶. There is a significant amount of best practice to draw upon, however. There are genuine pockets of innovation developed by Youth Services, local authorities, the police and voluntary sector organisations among others. The development of 'dry pubs' for teenagers is one example of an attempt to provide social activities that will attract teenagers without patronising them³⁷. Other initiatives encourage young people to raise money and develop plans for the type of places where they want to spend time and the things they want to do. There are also innovations which recognise that teenagers may simply want a place to meet in the open and spend time with their friends without being considered a nuisance.

Youth zones and youth shelters have been developed in some areas as designated spaces in parks and other public spaces for young people to congregate, sit and talk, 'hang-out' and shelter in bad weather³⁸. Spreading such innovative practice is one way in which parents of teenagers and teenagers themselves could be better supported.



³⁶ For further discussion of issues around the provision of services for teenagers see Edwards and Hatch 2003

³⁷ See Young People Now, Dry bars: the soft option September 2003

³⁸ Worpole K 2003

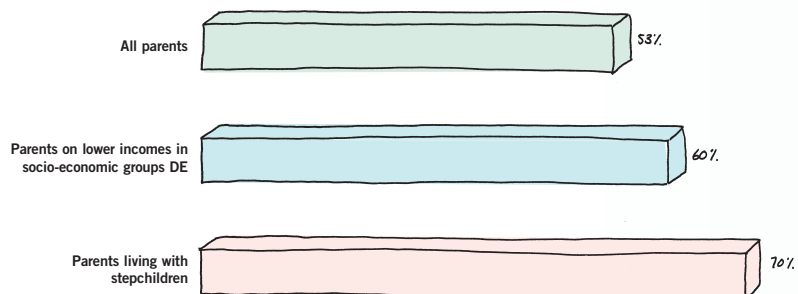


3. Boost support networks

Parents of teenagers are often parenting in silence, reluctant to speak out when things go wrong for fear that they may be branded a failure. Fifty three per cent of parents wish it were easier to talk to other mothers and fathers with teenage children about the challenges they face as parents. This rises to 60 per cent of those in the lowest social classes and 70 per cent of those with stepchildren agreeing with the statement.

See *fig.10*

fig.10 Percentage of parents who wish it were easier to talk to other mothers and fathers with teenage children about the challenges of being a parent



For many of the parents surveyed getting more support from their partner, from friends and family and being able to speak to other parents about the challenges of being a parent were what they felt would most improve their life as a parent. For twenty per cent of mothers, more support from their partner was what they felt would most improve their life as a parent. Around ten per cent of mothers and fathers state that more support from friends and family would most improve their life as a parent, while another ten per cent state that being able to meet and talk to other parents of teenagers would help them out most. Parents should be able to call on a range of people, both within and outside of their family, for guidance, support and practical help.

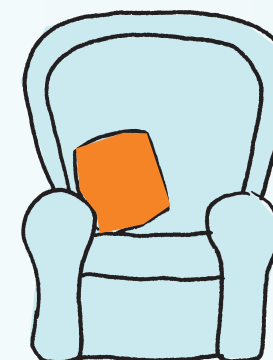
For parents who feel isolated and unsure, strengthening informal links between parents and helping them to share their skills and reflect on the challenges they face could play an important role in helping them through the difficult times. Evidence suggests that parental stress is relieved by human contact – with other parents and with empathetic practitioners³⁹.

Making it easy for parents to talk to each other about the normal challenges they face, particularly when their children hit their teens, should be a priority for policy makers, business and society as a whole. Many parents admit that parenting is a process of trial and error and that they don't always have the solutions to the dilemmas that they're faced with. However, there is not a climate in the UK which encourages parents to think of parenting skills as something that they can actively learn and discuss.

Parents should be encouraged and enabled to create their own informal support groups and networks in the workplace, in communities and on the internet. Many such networks already exist and, as with the provision of activities for young people, there are examples of innovative practice. 'Net mums' for example, is a website set up by mums for mums. It acts as a forum for mothers of young children to share their experiences with other mothers in their local area and get practical help and advice about what services and support is on offer to them⁴⁰. Parentline Plus is a registered charity which offers support to all parents and runs a freephone helpline, courses for parents as well as providing a range of information⁴¹.

However, evidence suggests that the provision of information and support for parents is not widespread or accessible enough and in many cases parents simply do not know what is on offer⁴².

Parenting support networks which can be accessed for advice, information and reassurance need to be an every day option rather than a form of crisis intervention when things go wrong⁴³. The overwhelming majority of parents agree that the teenage years are the most difficult. Too many are dealing with the challenges and dilemmas they face in silence. Finding imaginative ways to boost parent support networks would help parents feel more confident and in control of their lives and their family when they hit the testing teens.



³⁹ Moorman and Ball 2001

⁴⁰ www.netmums.com

⁴¹ www.parentlineplus.co.uk

⁴² See Henricson and Roker 2000 for a review of support provided to parents of adolescents

⁴³ See the Parenting Education and Support Forum at www.parenting-forum.org.uk and the National Family and Parenting Institute at www.nfpi.org for further discussion on meeting parents' support needs

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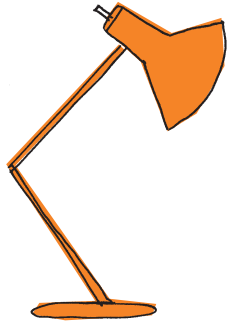
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Appendix 1



Survey details

ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 1008 mothers and fathers by telephone in April and May 2004. Interviews were conducted across the country to represent the social class and ethnicity of Britain as a whole. All of those surveyed had at least one teenage child living at home, just under half also had younger children. Equal numbers of mothers and fathers were interviewed.

The questions asked were as follows:

How easy or difficult do you find it to do each of the following as a parent?

- *Make sure that my children attend school every day*
- *Help my children with their school work*
- *Spend as much time as I would like with my children*
- *Buy the things that my children want*
- *Discipline my children*
- *Make sure that my children don't abuse drink or drugs*
- *Listen to what my children want*

Do you think you have a more difficult job as a father/mother than your own father/mother did?

What do you argue about most with your children?

Does shopping with your children cause arguments and stress for you as a parent?

How often do you do each of the following as a parent?

- *Ground or withdraw privileges from your children*
- *Physically punish your children*
- *Reward your children*
- *Praise your children*
- *Tell your children off*

Thinking of your oldest child still living at home, what has been the most difficult age for you as a father/mother? Why was this period difficult?

How would you describe your satisfaction with your life as a parent?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

- *'I sometimes worry that I'm not doing a good enough job as a parent'*

Do you think that being a parent has a mainly positive or mainly negative impact on each of the following?

- *Your motivation at work*
- *Your general health*
- *Your sleep*
- *Your energy level*
- *Your sex life*
- *Your relationship*
- *How productive you are at work*

Which of the following would most improve your life as a parent?

- *More money*
- *More supervised activities/youth clubs for children to attend*
- *More support from my child's school*
- *More support from my husband/wife/partner*
- *Being able to meet and talk to other parents*
- *Access to information and advice about being a parent*
- *A more understanding employer*
- *Other*

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- *'Society is more supportive of parents with younger children than it is of parents with teenagers'*
- *'I wish it were easier to talk to other fathers/mothers with teenage children about the challenges of being a parent'*

Should parents attend parenting classes if their children repeatedly get into trouble?

Appendix 2



Case study details

The table below shows the profile of the families interviewed as case studies for this report. All families had at least one teenager living at home. We were keen to reflect the diversity

of family dynamics existing in the UK today. In each family interviews were conducted with both parents, where relevant, and with at least one of the children in the family.

All families were recruited by experienced recruiters using a screening questionnaire through the market research agency Criteria. Respondents were paid a cash incentive for giving up their time to participate in the discussion.

Each interview with parents lasted around an hour, interviews with children lasted for half an hour. All interviews followed a flexible discussion guide and were conducted in May 2004. The case studies were conducted and analysed by Miranda Lewis at ippr and the report author.

The identities of the all case studies have been changed in the report.

Family type	Description	Other details	Location
Larger family	Family with two birth parents living together and three or four children	Social class ABC1, Asian	Warrington
Working family	Family with birth parents both working and at least two children living at home	Social class C2DE, White British	Liverpool
Stepfather family	Family involving a divorced or separated mother living with her new partner and her children	Social class ABC1, White British	Kingston
Merged stepfamily	Family where both parents have been in previous relationships and are now living with children from both of their past relationships	Social class C2DE, White British	Warrington
Single mother	Single mother family	Social class C2DE, Black British	Liverpool
Single father	Single father family	Social class ABC1, White British	Kingston