



New researchers  
in families and relationships

## Parents, teenagers and family life: a qualitative investigation

This briefing reports on a study that set out to investigate relationships between parents and young people in ordinary families in Scotland. Through interviews with parents and teenagers, it explored their ideas about families, what they saw as important in family life as well as the negotiation of increasing independence for young people. It also aimed to investigate the parenting styles that parents of teenagers adopted, and relate these to the styles seen as producing favourable outcomes in existing research literature. It also considered views on types of family, given the increased diversity of living arrangements in contemporary society.

### Key points

- Parents and young people felt that good communication was essential to a good relationship and that it led to positive outcomes for young people
- Spending time as a family was valued by both parents and young people
- Young people and parents emphasised the expressive and caring nature of relationships when describing family as more important than issues such as whether one or both parents were resident
- The activities that parents and young people saw as making up family life stretched beyond the household to include the neighbourhood and other households. However only certain neighbourhoods were seen as offering safety to young people and assistance to parents in fulfilling their parenting role
- Parents tried to help their children establish peer networks which they perceived as safe, and where values were similar to their own
- The idea of a family meal where everyone got together was strong, although in daily life this was often given lower priority than other activities
- The availability of friends and social networks influenced how effectively parents felt they could act as parents

---

This bulletin is the work of a new researcher and is being published to co-incide with CRFR's first new researchers conference, which is an event of our new researchers network. For more information or to join our new researchers network please visit our website [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk), or contact us at the address on the back of this briefing.

---

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships involves a consortium of universities in Scotland and is committed to producing research and commentary on families and relationships relevant to Scotland and to disseminating such work widely. It was set up in January 2001 with the support of a research development grant from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. We produce a range of publications and hold different types of events to promote collaboration across sectors, to stimulate debate and to enhance the dissemination of research. Research Briefings provide the opportunity for short, accessible reporting of primary research; literature reviews; commentary on demographic and social trends; and think pieces on topical issues. Details of current and future issues are on the back page

This research investigated what family meant to young people and their parents and their understandings of the contemporary role of family in society. Families are becoming more diverse, with increasing divorce and remarriage rates, and increased cohabitation. Given that the popular conception of the family doesn't seem to have shifted to reflect these trends, one aim was to explore how families negotiated the lived reality of family life.

The study grew from a finding in the West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study that despite there being differences in the material standards of living between intact, separated and reconstituted families, there was no difference in health and well being scores. This appeared to confound a body of research that linked families which had experienced marital disruption with a range of detrimental health and well-being outcomes for young people. This longitudinal research also found a positive relationship between time spent together as a family and health related outcomes. This became the starting point for an investigative study to shed light on these findings. As the study developed, it began to focus less on health and more on the understandings of family people had. In particular, the interest in what exactly "family time" meant became greater.

The fieldwork for this study involved in-depth, open-ended interviews with 22 families selected on measures of family structure and socio-economic status. The selection criteria were unusual for this type of research as it deliberately avoided recruiting families that had specific problems, preferring to focus on 'ordinary' families, more representative of the population as a whole. It was difficult encouraging people to open up their personal lives to the scrutiny of a researcher and the recruitment process was lengthy. All families included teenagers (ages ranged between 13 and 17). Of the 22 families, 11 had only one resident parent. 10 of the entire sample fell into a "low" socio-economic status category, 4 were categorised as "medium" and the remainder "high". Young people and their resident parent(s) were interviewed together as a family unit and separately (the teenager on their own and the resident parent(s) in a separate interview). In all 66 interviews took place. Respondents were recruited over an 18 month period from a variety of sources such as schools, general practices, family support groups and responders to previous questionnaires from The Medical Research Council Unit where the study was based. This briefing reports on some of the key findings from the study.

## The importance of communication

Both parents and young people felt that good communication was essential to a good relationship between young people and their parents and that it was good for young people's development. Good communication was not just seen as a means of encouraging children to keep parents informed of their activities and whereabouts, it was also seen as a means of linking experiences within the home to those beyond it, in the peer group, school or the homes of other family members (e.g. non-resident parents). Parents said that they could then help young people make sense of the experiences they had outside the home and incorporate these experiences into the values that

parents were attempting to pass on to their children.

*Father* "I think the major problem is not communicating. I think the problem is that teenagers can lock themselves away in their own world, and the adults don't try to get into that world. Then there's a sort of barrier created for probably quite a number of years. Even though he has got totally diverse opinions from say, both of us, we always like to keep the lines of communication open."

PS "What happens if you don't keep open the lines of communication?"

*Father* "You drift apart, there's a great divide. You have teenagers wandering the streets, arriving home late and going to bed and that's it. You don't really know what's going on, I think that's where a lot of problems arise."

Father 03, two parent household

## Making sense of diversity- what is family?

The increased diversity in family forms was reflected in the sample of families interviewed in this study. One aim was to find out how the people interviewed understand the concept of family in the light of the diverse family living arrangements experienced. Parents and young people alike talked about the idea of family time as an opportunity for expression, an idea central to their understandings of family.

PS "*So what makes a family?*"

Teenager "*The time that they spend together. Like if they go somewhere like to the pictures or the park, or shopping. I wouldn't say we were a model family, but we always find time to spend with each other.*"

Teenager 01, two parent household

Additionally, family bonds were described as having a robustness despite the increased likelihood of separation and divorce. In relation to parenting, this enabled the parent/child relationship to survive the stresses and strains of family life.

*"In a family you have a little bit more elasticity, you can push it a little bit further and know they are still going to be your family. To a large extent the family is a proving ground, you get a chance to find limits because you'll know they'll stick around for you more. They may shout about it but they are still family no matter how much you call them."*

Mother 02, one parent household

In terms of the parental structure of families, there was evidence of beliefs that having two parents was ideal (which could be expressed as "one of each kind"). This was the case even in households with a living arrangement that involved only one resident parent. However, across all types of households, beliefs that parenting functions could be carried out successfully by one parent or two parents were also reported. A common theme in both dual and single parent households was that they felt that the expressive and caring atmosphere of the family was

more important than the parental structure of households.

“I’d rather they be apart and happy than together and miserable, especially if they are making other people’s lives miserable as well!”

Teenager 02, one parent household

In lone-parent households (in this sample, all lone mothers) the absence of the other parent was sometimes described as a resource – giving teenagers access to two households. In many cases the absent fathers still had a disciplinary input, however whether this complemented or went against the resident mother’s style depended upon their relationship. The lone-parents who had no parenting input from a non-resident father felt they had a tougher time, but often recognised that they did not have to deal with conflicting values, or have their child “play one parent off against another.”

## Social networks, value maintenance, and young people’s safety

Managing the increasing autonomy of young people that accompanies this stage of the life-course was a key concern expressed by all parents in the study. In looking at how parents attempted to keep their teenage children safe from harm as they moved away from the influences of parents and home to the influences of the peer group, a process of value maintenance could be observed. Parents described how they sought to help their children establish peer networks which the parents themselves perceived as safe. This perception of safety often came in the form of parents recognising the values that their children were coming into contact with as being the same as their own. This could, for example, involve parents getting to know the parents of their teenage children’s friends to ensure that their parenting values were similar. The following quote illustrates how the act of parenting teenagers goes beyond the household and can be embedded within wider social networks.

“I speak to Christina’s pals’ mothers on the phone and we all have a chat with each other, and with Robbie’s pal’s mum. I chat to her. We tend to talk about what we’re going to allow them to do, so we all going along at the same pace.”

Mother 04, two parent household

Siblings of teenagers were reported as having a role in this process. They could assist in the process of value maintenance through offering support to the parents and “safe” networks of association, helping teenagers find space to experiment with their independence:

“What we have discovered is that the older siblings of our children’s friends act as older siblings to ours, it sort of acts a bit like family, the older ones keep half an eye on the younger ones, which gives everybody more freedom... It builds up a network of people, of places, safe houses, places where you know their values are the same as ours, their outlook is similar to ours, they’re not likely to encounter something we wouldn’t like.”

Father 05, two parent household.

However, only certain neighbourhoods were seen by parents as offering this safety and assistance. In some areas, where there were not many families containing children of a similar age, the influence of the local area could be seen as negative by parents who felt unsupported or that their children’s behaviour was misunderstood. In these areas, peer networks of young people were perceived as posing a risk to young people and were experienced as undermining the values that parents were trying to teach their children. Some families had the financial resources to choose their neighbourhood but not all had this luxury. One parent, who felt her neighbourhood did not facilitate her job as a parent, commented:

“Well I didn’t get off to a very good start because of my neighbours. For some reason they took a dislike to me. They put in complaints about Mark playing football and then a couple of times Katy had her friends up and they complained about that.”

Mother 07, one parent household

This was in stark contrast to her previous neighbourhood of which she said;

*“if I needed somebody to watch the kids I could always go to a neighbour and they could always come to me”.*

## Parenting strategies in everyday life: the example of mealtimes.

As part of the process of understanding parents’ and teenagers’ ideas of family, the study looked at mealtimes. The idea of a collective sit-down family meal between all members of the household was valued by both parents and teenagers interviewed, and seen as an important aspect of family life. However, the everyday reality of a daily family meal was by no means certain. Main reasons given in the interviews for not holding a daily family meal were linked partly to issues of not having available time freed from paid work. This could particularly be an issue in households with only one resident parent. In such households, meals might be taken at a grandparent’s house, who would support parents’ working, or occasionally at the house of the non-resident parent (usually at less crucial times such as weekends). Having the space available for a collective family meal could also be an issue, as having a designated dining table was not a luxury afforded in all households.

However, it was also evident from parents’ interviews that, linked to the decision to hold a sit-down together family meal, were parental priorities about the best way to spend available time. As well as providing nutrition and a balanced meal, reasons for holding, or not holding, a family meal could be linked to parenting styles and beliefs about how to achieve discipline.

Some parents valued a collective family meal as a way of passing key skills on to young people. As well as teaching young people etiquette and manners however, it also allowed a space for communication and feeling part of a family. It was also an opportunity to bring the different experiences of home, school and work together. The opportunity for communication was

seen as more important than the provision of nutrition by many parents interviewed.

“It’s an opportunity for everyone to sort of talk...chat to each other, to pull together as a family unit, and you don’t get that if everybody is out during the day”

Mother 08, two parent household

“We talk about what we did in school because you’ve not seen your mum for a whole day and it’s just good to see her again and talk to her about what you’ve done at school and things like that.”

Teenager 07, single parent household

“I think it is really important to spend time with your family. It has been on the T.V. It is the key to having a good relationship kind of thing. Like if you can have once a week a time when everybody can sit down together, be it dinner, breakfast or lunch or whatever. Even if they go out for a meal, the four, the five how many there is in that family they should all do something once a week, all of them together to maintain a relationship kind of thing.”

Teenager 01, two parent household

However, other activities were in some cases prioritised over the collective family meal. Some interviewees reported that individual preferences and activities and an emphasis on choice and relaxation sometimes became more important than a family meal. In other households a family meal would be suspended for activities which were seen as more important in the development of young people. This included sporting activities or other after-school or extra curricula activities.

## Conclusions

All the parents in this study wanted to maintain their own belief and value system by ensuring that the people their teenagers came into contact with had similar values to their own. Their own values could be seen implicitly in how they

talked about the organisation of family life, through practices such as how eating was organised. The research also showed how mealtimes could be used to link experiences within and beyond the home, through providing an opportunity to talk about one’s day. Reasons for not holding a family meal were reported as aiming to serve a similar purpose, to help young people foster “safe spaces” such as sporting or after school activities in which to develop their autonomy.

Communication was shown to be pivotal in parenting strategies, as it was the means by which developments in adolescent autonomy outside the home could be compared with values inside the home. This accords with the recent work by Kerr and Stattin pointing to child disclosure, rather than parental soliciting of activities outside the home, as correlating with the most successful outcomes for young people (e.g. educational attainment and good mental health). However the findings reported here go a step further to show how some parents attempt to shape the networks young people enter into, thus producing a perception of increased safety. They also show how the task of parenting can take place beyond the household and is shaped by the social networks that parents and families have access to (such as other parents and friends of older siblings) Not all parents are equally well- placed in this regard. The recognition of this limitation to the development of parenting could be timely given the increasing emphasis on parental duties and responsibilities as part of the government’s overall strategy for tackling youth crime and truancy, while at the same time supporting communities and neighborhoods.

## References

- Baumrind, D. 1978. ‘Parental Disciplinary Patterns and Social Competence in Children’. *Youth and Society* 9: 229-276.
- Kerr, M. and Stattin, H. 2000. What Parents Know, How They Know it, and Several Forms of Adolescent Adjustment: Further Support for a Reinterpretation of Monitoring. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 36, No 3 366-380

This briefing was written by Pete Seaman based on research conducted as part of a PhD project funded by the Medical Research Council. The researcher was based at the Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow, he now works on a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project, investigating parenting in disadvantaged communities based in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Glasgow.

It was edited for this briefing by Sarah Morton and Kathryn Backett-Millburn CRFR

## CRFR Research Briefing Series

CRFR Briefing 5: Child Sexual Abuse: Fracturing Family Life	June 2002
CRFR Briefing 6: Divorce in Scotland	Sept 2002
CRFR Briefing 8: Parenting after separation	October 2002

For a full list of Research Briefings visit our website [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)

### Contact details:

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh  
23 Buccleuch Place  
Edinburgh EH8 9LN

**Tel:** 0131-651-1832  
**Fax:** 0131-651 1833  
**E-mail:** [crfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:crfr@ed.ac.uk)  
**Website:** [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)