



Listening to Parents

Their worries, their solutions

National Family & Parenting Institute Survey
conducted by MORI
October 2001



Parents worry. They worry whether they are doing a good, or good enough job, and they worry about what kind of world their children will grow up in. They worry about things within their control, and outside their control. As this survey shows, they worry about just about everything – but a balance must be struck. We are in danger of becoming a nation of over-anxious parents who have forgotten how to trust our judgement.

In recent years, there has been far more interest amongst academics and policy makers in the hows and whys of parenting and family life, and how family life affects and is affected by the pressures of working life and other external factors. Putting parents and families under the microscope may be useful and helpful for research, planning services and policy making, but it can feel intrusive and judgmental to individual parents.

Often the results of research are presented through the media in negative and unhelpful ways. Parents go about their day-to-day business of raising a family in the face of constant and often conflicting advice about bringing up children. There is a steady stream of surveys criticising parents: computers, TV, the internet, how long we spend at work, not working at all, being a lone parent, being divorced...the list is endless. Parents have become an easy target for people looking for someone to blame.

Yet parents generally want to do the best for their children in a rapidly changing world. Never have the pressures of the outside world impinged so much on family life: changing patterns of work and working hours, the long-hours culture, the strains on public services, the high level of family poverty and the pressures of the market on children and young people, together with the increase in divorce and pressures on relationships. So how are parents coping? And what do they say about their worries and their solutions?

One of our main aims is to amplify parents' voices, to provide a channel from the parent to the policy maker and researcher to counter the one-way street of messages. It is important that parents are valued in their role, not just seen as "clients" or problems when things go wrong; listening to parents and engaging in a public conversation with them would both help to support them, and ensure that family services are more likely to get it right.

This report is the third in the survey series published by the NFPI. By running regular surveys, we hope to be able to track over time parents' changing attitudes – to family life, to parenting issues and to the world around them.

This survey asks parents what is troubling them. It asks about broader social issues, and about concerns about their own parenting or family life. Their answers are surprisingly consistent across social background, race and location. But in addition to asking them about their concerns, the survey asked them their views on successful and strong families. There is an increasing interest in resilience amongst children and families as we realise that we need to know about what makes strong families as much as we need to understand what makes families and relationships go under. The views of parents may well help to shed light on what makes for resilient and successful family life.

Setting the scene: Britain in October 2001

Between 26th and 30th July 2001, MORI conducted 1,391 interviews in Great Britain. The survey results were weighted to reflect the national population profile. A booster survey with black and minority ethnic parents was also conducted.

The survey was conducted against the background of continuing public debate about parenting and family life.

- The Office of National Statistics published figures showing families are getting smaller, with an average of just 1.66 children per family. There were a spate of articles in the press on the benefits and problems of only children, and questions about why people were having fewer children.
- The average age of a mother giving birth for the first time is now 29.
- Recent figures show a drop in the divorce rate but the UK still topped the European divorce table. The drop coincided with a drop in the numbers getting married.



- New research looked at how parental conflict affects children and concluded that how parents argue, rather than whether children are present or absent, is what matters.
- Women with a dependent child are working 2.5 hours more a week relative to women without children, than they were during the early 1990s. However they still work fewer hours than women without children.
- Parents do more in a day than 40 years ago. Research has found that they now do 8.4 activities a day compared with 7.2 in 1961, but less than one in 10 parents said they had time to relax.
- Working mothers could affect their children's A-level results, according to research published by the Institute for Social and Economic Research. At the same time, a survey by a women's magazine found that 95 per cent of working mothers frequently felt stressed, and 78 per cent said they "would quit their current job tomorrow given the chance."

Key Findings

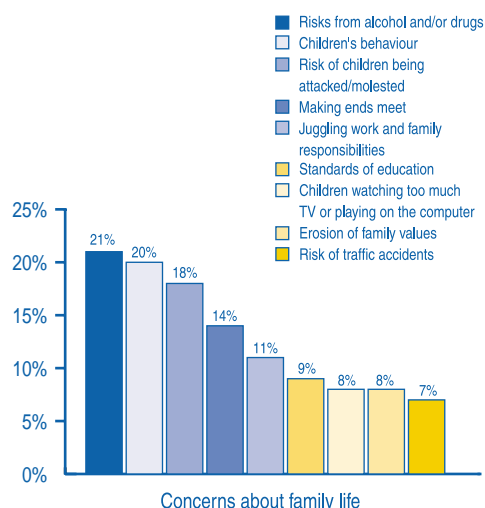
- Parents' biggest anxiety about family life in Britain was the risks from drugs and alcohol. This was consistent across men, women and social class, but showed variations in different parts of the country.
- Education was a major concern, particularly to parents living in London and East England.
- Parents found teenage years the most difficult to handle, but less than half wanted more information to help them through those years.
- Parents' recipe for a successful family life was spending time together and talking with each other – partners as well as children.
- Some parents valued and wanted information about parenting and children, but a substantial number (48%) said they do not require more information about child development.
- Parents were most likely to seek information first from family and friends and then from local services, like their doctor, local school or playgroup.
- National and government sources of information were less popular.

Family life

Parents expressed many concerns about family life in today's world. The biggest worry expressed by parents across the board was anxiety about the risks from alcohol and drugs. More parents (21 per cent) worried about drugs and alcohol than anything else, regardless of their age, income and job status. However, there were significant regional variations, ranging from greatest anxiety in Scotland (34 per cent) to least anxiety in the West Midlands (14 per cent), and surprisingly perhaps, London (11 per cent). The reasons for the relatively low percentage in London are far from clear, and would merit more research.

Older parents (55-64) worried more about children's behaviour, the second most common concern, and younger parents (15-34) worried most about the risk of children being attacked or molested, the third most common concern.

Table A



[1,391 parents surveyed. Parents were asked to choose up to three concerns, unprompted.]

Some parents also talked about exam and homework pressures; bullying; lack of discipline; children's health and safety generally. These concerns reflect a wide span of anxieties about family life, picking up on themes from other surveys of parents.

Fears about drugs and alcohol could reflect a realisation that their children are likely to be offered both. Recent research shows drinking and drug-taking amongst 12-17 year olds is relatively high. According to the Home Office, most 12-17 year olds have drunk alcohol at some point in their lives, with one in four classified as frequent drinkers. However, the Home Office found a link between parents' drinking habits and those of their children – children whose parents drank heavily were three times more likely to drink heavily.

Latest figures show that a third of 11-15 year olds in England and Wales have been offered drugs (37 per cent of boys and 34 per cent of girls.) Eleven per cent of 11-15 year olds had used drugs in the last year but the figure increases sharply within that age band: 1 per cent of 11 year olds had used drugs compared with 28 per cent of 15 year olds.

Being a parent

We asked parents about their concerns about being a parent, and the issues that arise in their families. By far the greatest concern parents expressed was about their child's education. Almost one quarter of parents put education at the top of their list of worries, with better off parents and those with secondary school age children being the most concerned. London parents were particularly anxious.

Seventeen per cent of parents also worried about their children "growing up too fast", 15 per cent about not spending enough time with them, and 14 per cent not being able to provide for them. Almost twice as many fathers say that they are concerned about not spending enough time with their children as mothers (19 per cent versus 11 per cent). Parents who are working full-time (21 per cent) are also more likely to feel worried about this than those working part-time (13 per cent) or not working at all (10 per cent). It is worth noting that part-time working parents do not appear to be so troubled by not spending enough time with their children, indicating that they may have found a balance between work and family responsibilities.

Other anxieties about being a parent included:

- arguments and conflicts (7%)
- children eating unhealthily (4%)
- coping with tantrums (3%)
- feeling isolated (3%)

Minority ethnic parents

The MORI survey asked a wide range of parents about their concerns about family life. In addition, we conducted an extra survey of minority ethnic parents to ensure that their views were accurately heard and represented. The report of that survey, *Listening to minority ethnic parents*, can be obtained separately from the NFPI, but the key points are listed below:

- Anxiety about risks from alcohol or drugs is a strong concern amongst ethnic minority parents, but more parents are worried about children's behaviour and making ends meet.

- Almost a quarter of ethnic minority families were concerned about their child's education, a similar proportion to white families.
- When asked what information about different ages and stages of child development would be useful, more ethnic minority parents would value information about their children's development. 49 per cent of white parents wanted no information, but only 35 per cent of ethnic minority parents were not interested in information on this issue.
- Attitudes to discipline were the same for both groups. Both ethnic minority and white parents valued setting a good example and making children feel happy and loved far higher than smacking.
- Questions on what makes a successful family brought out some differences between white and ethnic minority parents. More black and Asian parents stressed the importance of a good relationship between the parents, and being able to discuss difficulties with their partner. However, more significant was that many ethnic minority families raised basic needs such as housing. Ten per cent of parents identified having a decent place to live as important, compared with four per cent of white parents.
- Ethnic minority parents are just as likely to turn to friends and family for information, and more likely to go to the library.

Ages and stages of child development

The NFPI recently conducted an audit of support services for families, called *National Mapping of Family Services in England and Wales*. One of the main findings was that there is a marked concentration of support and services for parents of children under five years old, and a failure to provide services for families of older children. Families of children who are under five are twice as likely to be targeted by services as the families of children aged 5-10 years, and three times as likely to be targeted as the families of children aged 11-15.

Yet the table below shows that parents found the teenage years the most difficult. The evidence from our survey supports the research finding that there is a significant gap in support for parents and families in teenage years, particularly given that parents' greatest worry for their children is drugs.

Which ages and stages of child development (a) parents found difficult and (b) needed more information about

(1,391 parents surveyed)

	Difficult %	More info %
Conception and pregnancy	4	6
Birth and the month afterward	11	11
Up to a year	8	6
1-5 years	15	7
5-10 years	7	4
Early teenage years 11-14	32	15
Late teenage years 15-18	27	14
None of these	19	48
Don't know	2	4

However, the survey should also give service and information providers pause for thought. Though half the parents were interested in information about child development, nearly half were not. Despite many parents finding teenage years difficult, only a small proportion wanted more information. It is difficult to know the reason for this finding; do older parents, for example, tend to seek information less than younger parents, perhaps reflecting a more traditional view that parenting and family problems are private? Do parents fear being judged as inadequate?

However, it may also reflect a reaction from parents to the stream of information targeted at them; information which is sometimes conflicting, sometimes judgmental and sometimes inappropriate. Whilst it is important not to over-emphasise this one finding, it is interesting that almost half the parents interviewed did not want any information at all.

Successful families

Most parents describe a successful family as one that shares time together (35 per cent) and where parents have a good relationship with each other. There are important messages here for policy makers. Focusing on the parents' own relationship, making sure that help is available if it runs into difficulties is important for the health of the whole family. Yet relationship support services are thin on the ground. The NFPI's recent audit of family services found that of a grand

total of 10,834 services offered to support families, only 394 involved marriage preparation, 653 family therapy and 576 couple counselling. These services were predominantly run by the voluntary sector, with huge geographical variation. Far more resources and value need to be placed on supporting relationships, not just at the point of separation and divorce, but at key times of possible crisis, such as the birth of a child. There is a clear message from parents that a good relationship is vital.

Time too is clearly a key factor. As many have said, we live in a cash rich, time poor society. With globalisation comes the 24 hours/7 days-a-week economy, bringing long hours, unsocial shifts and pressure at work which all militate against time with the family. Almost 70 per cent of women today are working – the third highest women's employment rate in Europe. Overall, 65 per cent of women with dependent children work, but as many as 54 per cent of women with children under five work, many part-time.

With so many women going back to work much earlier, and staying in work, family time can be a casualty. A recent study suggested that only 15 per cent of families sit down to eat together in the evening; most families eat together just on special occasions. However, meals together are a relaxed and informal way of exchanging information, talking and having an opportunity to check that all is well. The importance that parents in this survey attach to spending time together is further evidence that flexible working is crucial in allowing families to balance their work and family responsibilities. Term-time working, flexible hours, a right to return part-time after maternity leave and paid parental leave are all options that could help individual families.

Although sharing time together was the single biggest factor identified by parents, there were variations. An average of 41 per cent of AB families and those with a higher income put sharing time together first, compared to an average of 30 per cent of DE families and those on a lower income. This difference might reflect working patterns and the ability or not to exercise choice about when and how much to work between the different groups. There was also geographical variation: only 17 per cent of London parents valued sharing time compared with 41 per cent of West Midlands, South West and Eastern parents and 50 per cent of parents from Yorkshire. London parents put far greater emphasis on parents having a good relationship and being able to discuss difficulties, and a higher than average reliance on having family and friends around to talk to and help out.

Other aspects of successful families mentioned by parents were:

- Having enough money (13%)
- Setting and enforcing family rules (13%)
- Having family and friends to ask for help when needed (12%)
- Having two parents, not one (12%)
- A loving environment (10%)
- Sharing responsibility for housework and childcare (8%)
- Having a decent place to live (4%)
- Mutual respect (4%)
- Honesty/openness (3%)
- Trust (3%)
- Discipline (3%)

Telling right from wrong

In 1999, the NFPI asked parents how they think children should be taught the difference between “right” and “wrong”. This survey asked the same question to track whether there had been any changes in public opinion on this issue.

Since 1999, there has been much debate about different ways of disciplining and punishing children, and ways of parenting positively without recourse to punitive methods. The Government published a consultation paper on smacking, seeking views on banning smacking to certain parts of the body, for example, the head, and with implements. The consultation ended in 2000, but the Government has yet to announce its plans. Meanwhile, the Scottish Executive had made proposals to make it illegal to smack children under three, and to hit children on the head, shake them or strike them with an implement.

So has public opinion moved? The table below shows the results of the two surveys.

Teaching children right from wrong
(1,391 parents were asked which they think would most enable parents to achieve this)

	2001	1999
	%	%
Parents setting a good example	76	78
Making children feel happy and loved	73	77
Spending time with children	71	77
Reasoning with children	50	64
Rewarding good behaviour	46	54
Grounding children	26	33
Creating a diversion	16	21
Smacking children	16	23

Now, as then, parents most favour teaching a child the difference between right and wrong by parents themselves setting a good example. Building up a child's self-esteem and confidence through making them feel happy and loved is also important, as is spending time with children. Half of parents say reasoning with children and rewarding good behaviour would be effective.

Grounding children and smacking them continue to be less popular measures. But fathers are slightly more likely than mothers to advocate smacking children (20 per cent versus 13 per cent) and grounding children (29 per cent versus 24 per cent). There were also regional differences. Scottish and Yorkshire parents were the most supportive of smacking (20 per cent and 25 per cent respectively) and London parents the least (nine per cent).

These two surveys seem to confirm a trend in parents' attitudes towards positive parenting, a finding also supported by the very small number of parents who believed that “discipline” was a factor in successful families. Today's parents think communication, negotiation, loving behaviour and reason produce good families, even if they find it difficult and frustrating and less easy to impose their authority. In this survey, parents' second worry is managing children's behaviour, suggesting that there is something of a confidence gap.

Yet whilst there is evidence that parents support this approach, 75 per cent of parents still smack their children. Research suggests that most parents use a variety of disciplines – both positive and punitive – and are most likely to smack when they themselves are under stress. A recent report by the NFPI, *Understanding Discipline*, reviewed the research on what works and what does not work in managing children's behaviour. It found that whilst no simple conclusion can be drawn, there is evidence that coercive punishment does not work, and that children fared best with an authoritative approach to parenting which combined affection and firm boundaries with an encouragement of children's independence.

Information, information, information

Parents today are bombarded with information on how to parent. Information comes from all sides and through all media – internet, TV, leaflets, posters, professional advice and books.

Is it what parents want? Who do they prefer or trust to deliver information to them? It is becoming increasingly recognised that the way in which information is offered is as important as the content.

Parents are by no means unanimous about the need for information. Whilst there was a strong indication that

many parents appreciate information relating to the different ages and stages of their children, there was a clear counter message from other parents that they were not interested in information. Almost half of those questioned said they did not need any information about the stages of child development, although only 19 per cent said that they had no problems at any point of their child's development. A direct question to parents about ways of obtaining information drew a response from seven per cent that "there's too much information and advice given". Of that seven per cent, two thirds were men and one third women.

Like other studies, (eg *The Millennial Family*, NFPI, 1999) this survey clearly shows that friends and family are the most important means of getting information about parenting. Almost six in 10 parents put this option first. The next most popular methods are through local networks: schools and playgroups (29 per cent), doctors' surgeries (28 per cent) or local parent services, for example parent education or support groups (28 per cent).

More generalised channels of information scored less well. Only 15 per cent of parents wanted leaflets or posters, nine per cent telephone helplines and 14 per cent the internet (but full-time parents are three times more likely to use the internet than non-working parents).

Information from central government scored poorly. Despite the government being recognised by many as a source of information - 45 per cent knew that it provided information to parents - only 16 per cent said that they would use that information, and only 10 per cent of parents said they would find obtaining information from government useful. However, there were quite significant variations within that figure. Almost three times as many highly educated parents said they would use information from government than those less well educated.

The survey asked parents which organisations on a list providing information and advice to parents they recognised and which they would use.

Whilst some voluntary organisations were recognised by a majority of parents, most parents said they would not ask them for information. Citizens Advice Bureaux were the most popular source of information.

Willingness to ask for information and advice appears to be partly related to age, with older parents far less likely to use any organisation, than younger parents. Other factors affecting the use of organisations are likely to include concerns about confidentiality, access, and a general worry about being stigmatised and labelled a failure. However, for organisations wishing to ensure that their information and advice is reaching

parents, the origin of the information seems to be a factor. For example, parents across all social classes would go to a Citizens Advice Bureau, but half as many less well off parents would access government information or go to their local council.

Conclusions

Parents are not a homogeneous mass. This survey has shown some remarkable consistencies in worries and concerns across a broad range of parents. But some significant differences in parents' attitudes have also emerged, particularly in relation to their receptiveness to information about their children and their parenting. One clear message for both the statutory and voluntary sectors is that one size does not fit all; that the way that information is communicated is at least as important as the content, and that most parents would prefer to rely on informal, local networks for support than more distant and formal services.

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